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Juan de Dios

ST. JOHN OF GOD

Heavenly Patron
of
the Sick and Dying,
Nurses and Hospitals

by

Norbert McMahon

||||

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Methodist World Service Fund

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Religion

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CHAPTER I

THE WOUNDED SOLDIER

The Pyrenean foothills re-echoed with the hoof-beats of a horse in wild gallop; clinging to the maddened animal's neck, fearful of being flung to the ground, was a young Spanish mercenary. He had been out on a foraging expedition, for such soldiers in the sixteenth century were rarely paid in coin. Their services were recompensed by their having complete freedom to loot and pillage the countryside through which they passed. Ironically, the horse he had captured, the first on which he had set eyes, was a stray from the French lines; and now passing, by chance, close to that encampment, and scenting its companions, with a sharp whinny, it bolted straight for home. Handicapped by the absence of saddle or spurs, and by a make-shift reins of cord, the luckless rider could not check the headlong flight. Suddenly the animal shied at some

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object on its path, the unexpected jerk caused the soldier to loose his frantic grip, and he was flung to the ground. As he tumbled to earth, his head struck the sharp edge of a rock and he lay there stunned and still, whilst the now unhampered horse continued its course.

It was some hours later that he regained consciousness. His head ached intolerably and he passed his hand across his forehead in an effort to soothe the pain. Gradually, as his mind recovered from the shock, he realised the dangerous position in which he lay, close to the French camp, and far from his own lines. The fate of one who fought for the Emperor Charles V against the French at Fontarabia was not one to dwell on with any sense of comfort, and if the enemy came upon him lying there, he would be taken prisoner at once. He must find his way back to the Spanish camp as swiftly and as unobtrusively as possible. The mere thought of being imprisoned in a French dungeon was sufficient to urge him to make the attempt.

The hand which he was passing across his forehead soon became covered with blood that was oozing steadily from the wound caused by his fall. His face was streaked and his hair matted, and he felt both weak and ill. Nevertheless, he tried to rise to his feet, but a fit of dizziness sent him reeling to the ground once more. Realising that he must gather together what little strength remained to him, he rested a short space. Then, making another effort to rise, an effort made desperate by the danger which surrounded him, he once more failed to stand. All that now seemed to face him was either capture by a French patrol,

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or a slow death from starvation and exposure on the bleak hillside.

Sickness and misery merged into a drowsiness, and his mind, spent with the effort to force his body to rise and flee, drifted on a flood of memory. He saw himself as a child in his native village of Montemor-O-Novo, in far-off Portugal, living with his parents in their simple cottage, the centre of all their hopes and affections, for he was their only child. They were simple, pious country folk, this Andrew Ciudad and Theresa Duarte. How grateful they had been when God had given them a son who showed such promise of being no ordinary child, for had not the church bells rung of their own accord at the moment of his birth? They had consulted a hermit who lived in the nearby hills, as to the meaning of this omen, and the holy man had told the awe-struck parents that their child was destined for great things and would be noted for his sanctity. They christened him John, and all their relatives, friends and neighbours rejoiced with them; for, like St. John the Baptist, this infant seemed to be sent into this world for a great mission and in answer to their prayers for the blessing of a son.

As this same John Ciudad, now a soldier of twenty-seven, thought thus of his childhood and its associations, the tears of weakness and of memory flooded his eyes. What a monster of ingratitude he had shown himself to such devoted parents! At the age of eight, with the thoughtlessness of youth, he had left home and kindred to go in search of adventure in Spain. That was nineteen years ago, and from the day when he had slipped away,

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turning his back on all who knew and loved him, he had never seen his father and mother again. He had not even had word from them or about them and, for all he knew, they had probably died from broken hearts over his loss.

How well he remembered all that had led up to his running away! A traveling priest had chanced one evening to come to the little village of Montemor. John's father, with the simple generosity and courtesy of the Christian peasant, had offered the priest the hospitality of his hearth for as long as he might care to remain as a guest. Andrew Ciudad and his wife were delighted when the priest accepted their offer, for it was considered a great honor to have a minister of God stay under their humble roof. Their guest had roamed far and wide and, as they sat round the fire at night, he regaled them with wondrous tales of all that he had seen and heard in Portugal and in more distant Spain. Even little John was allowed to stay up beyond his usual bedtime, and he sat at the priest's feet, listening with rapt attention to every word he spoke.

It was an eventful period in Europe. Spain and Portugal were at the height of their power. John had been born in a great epoch, on March 8th, 1495, and now it was 1503. Vasco da Gama, who had hailed from that very village of Montemor, had circled the Cape of Good Hope only a few years previously, and opened up a new sea route to fabulous India. Christopher Columbus had discovered America a few years earlier, and men were leaving their homes in Spain to seek their fortune in the New World. Every ship that returned from America was laden

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with gold, silver and precious commodities, which went to swell the coffers of the rich and to adorn their palaces. Spain was free at last, from a domination which had lasted well-nigh 800 years. The Spanish sovereigns, Ferdinand and Isabella, had finally succeeded in driving the Moors from the country. History was in the making, and John was hearing of those who were weaving the pattern.

The priest had also been to Lisbon, that busy port, full always of ships from many lands, riding at anchor after unloading their cargoes—silks and spices from the Indies, gold and silver from America. The crowded quays were thronged by bronzed mariners, their pockets full of money, with passengers waiting to board ships which they fondly hoped would carry them to lands of untold wealth. The very air quivered with expectation and excitement. The discovery of these new lands with such prodigious riches made men feel that they were on the brink of a new era when everything was possible and great fortunes were there for those bold enough to venture forth in search of them. It was one of those times when it seemed that it was good to be young, when opportunity stretched out her hand and beckoned.

John listened with the avid curiosity of the young, and as he listened he caught something of the fever that was driving men to undertake such adventures, to make such discoveries, to endure so much in the mad scramble for the power and wealth of the new lands that were opening up to the bold. Thus it was that this wanderlust—or was it a divine impulse—urged him to leave behind the sleepy village of Montemor, where in his eyes nothing exciting

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ever happened or would likely ever happen, and go out into the great world that lay beyond its limits. As he tossed sleeplessly on his little bed that same night, a plan began to form in his young mind. He knew that the priest would be leaving early the following morning, to continue his journey to Madrid. What was to prevent John from stealing out of the cottage unnoticed and later join him on the road? The two of them would be companions on the way to that wonderful country, Spain. His boyish mind was so inflamed with ideas of adventure that he never once paused to consider that it would be a cruel and wicked thing to leave the parents who cherished him and to turn his back on his home.

Very quietly next morning, he watched while his father bade farewell to the priest, then he crept downstairs and slipped out through the door without being noticed. It was still very early, because travelers always set out at dawn so as to accomplish as much of their journey as possible before the great heat of the day made walking exhausting. John sped down the quietest and most deserted streets, so that none should observe and stop him, and soon had gained the open country. He kept the priest in sight, but Montemor had faded away into the hazy distance before he approached him. When he saw him pause and sit down by the roadside to rest, the boy came up and told him how he longed to accompany him to Madrid. What the reasons were which prompted the priest to agree to take the child with him we do not know. It may seem strange that he did not refuse, or at least question before consenting, but it is possible that he may

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have taken it for granted that John had his parents' permission; for he was a strong and healthy boy who could very easily have passed for fourteen, rather than for the eight years that were his age. It is one of the mysteries of God's Providence. All we know is that the priest and the boy set off together.

During twenty long days they tramped the dusty roads across Portugal *en route* for Spain. In the daytime they were scorched with the heat of the sun, and at night an icy wind blew down from the snow-capped mountains. Sometimes they were fortunate in finding a kind farmer who let them sleep in the hay in his barn; other nights, they lay out in the open, under the stars, crouching huddled together in a ditch, seeking to warm themselves. For food, they were dependent on what they could beg from the houses and cottages which they passed on their journey. It was a tough existence, but it served a useful purpose. It was John's apprenticeship to the hard life of the road, so that in later years he could appreciate the miserable lot of tramps and destitute pilgrims and could understand how to alleviate their hard lot. It was the best training he could have undergone.

One of the places where the two travelers stopped to beg a little food was the village of Oropesa. To their surprise, when they came to one house, not only were they invited in for a meal, but they were also provided with beds. It was the first bed in which John had slept since he had run away from Montemor twenty days before. The hardships and rough living proved too much for the boy, who after all was but eight years old, and accus-

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tomed to the care of a loving mother; so between exhaustion and home-sickness, he fell ill. The priest was anxious to resume his journey, and seeing that their kindly host had taken an interest in John, the boy was gladly left in his charge. We may presume that the priest was human enough to be thankful that he was relieved of the responsibility for the boy's welfare and safety.

The man who thus became John's foster-father was employed on the estate of Señor Ferrus-e-Navas, as the Majoral or overseer in charge of the shepherds. Again it seems strange that none sought to find out from whence he had come and then to send him back there. It is possible that the Majoral may have thought the boy an orphan. John himself was so bewildered and tired after such a long journey, and finding himself among strangers, that it is very probable he was not able to give a very clear account of himself. He may also have felt it hopeless now to think of finding his way back to his parents. Whatever may have been the case, the Majoral and his family, excellent Christians and charitable of heart, were moved to pity the homeless boy who had been left in their charge, and they sought to protect him. Accepted as a member of the Majoral's own family, John played with his children, attended school with them, and got what education a country school-master was able to impart to him. What was more important, he got a good grounding in the truths of his religion, and in the observance of his religious duties. His own parents, devout Catholics, had brought him up in an atmosphere of faith. God was

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watching over him: having been removed from the care of these parents, he was now in the hands of upright, God-fearing people.

In the mountainous districts where so many of the local inhabitants gained their livelihood by tending sheep, boys were put to work at an early age. Before he was fourteen years old, John was employed in carrying food to the shepherds, which meant that he had to walk long distances over the hills, for the flocks were constantly being moved to fresh pastures. As he became familiar with all the sheep tracks on the mountains, and showed himself a reliable and willing worker, John was given charge of a flock of sheep. How proud he was that first time he led them up across the hills, and with what care he watched over them! Often he had to pass whole nights out-of-doors, when he would crouch before his little fire of twigs and brushwood, with the sheep gathered together close by, his eyes and ears ever alert for prowling wolves.

The simple, open-air life developed his frame and in due time he grew into a tall, sturdy young man. Usually he was alone as he led his sheep, and in consequence learned to rely on his own judgment and to face up to any emergency. This life of solitude nurtured his religious sense and, during the long night vigils when the twinkling stars gleamed down on him, he would strive to banish all thoughts of loneliness or fear by reminding himself that God was there behind those stars, protecting him with a Father's care. The shepherds of that country had a great devotion to our Blessed Lady, and were in the habit of

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reciting her rosary as they trudged from pasture to pasture with their flocks. John was not long in making this devotion his own, for perhaps more than the others he felt the need of a mother's care. As he lay on the grass, after eating his simple meal, he would look up at the sky and imagine that the vivid blue above was the color of Mary's robe. His own mother had taught him an unusual devotion: the daily recital of twenty-four *Hail Marys* in honour of the twenty-four years of exile that the Blessed Virgin spent on this earth after the ascension of her Divine Son into heaven. John was faithful to this practice, and never let a day go by without sympathising in prayer with Mary in her loneliness during those long years of separation from her Son. The gnawing pangs of home-sickness, which he felt whenever the remembrance of his parents came into his mind, were somewhat eased by the realisation that he had a Heavenly Mother who was always watching over him.

The years sped by. Sun and wind tanned his skin, a short-trimmed beard gave him an air of dignity, while his eyes, which were singularly keen, revealed a simple, candid nature. He was tall and strong, with the virility resultant from hard work, and, though of a loveable and peaceful temperament, there lurked within him an impulsiveness that inclined him to act first and to consider afterwards.

As he gained in experience, he became more and more useful to the Majoral, and in time was promoted to be the latter's assistant and right-hand man. The Majoral was growing old and, having no sons of his own, he wished John to succeed him. The better to ensure this, he thought

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of bringing about a marriage between his daughter and this young man who had become to him as dear as any son could be. It seemed an excellent scheme, for the two young people had grown up together, and she had all those qualities required to make an ideal wife. Moreover, John was now approaching his twenty-seventh year, and it was time he settled down.

To the old man, everything seemed to be moving in the desired direction. He broached the subject one day in all confidence, when he and John were looking at some sheep they were sending to market. To his surprise and disappointment, the young man quickly turned the conversation to another topic. He did not persist on this occasion, but later on brought the subject up again. This time, however, John destroyed all the hopes and dreams which the Majoral had built up, by declaring emphatically that he did not wish to get married.

In view of what he was destined to become later on, we can well understand that Almighty God had not given him a vocation for matrimony. But his refusal affected the happy harmony that had up to this existed in the Majoral's home. The daughter, who had grown to love John, and who was aware of her father's hopes, was profoundly disappointed. John himself was too kind-hearted and sensitive not to appreciate how keenly he had pained the two who had been truly a father and sister to him for nearly twenty years. So he resolved to put an end to it by leaving them. It seemed the only solution that would help them all. An invasion of the north of Spain by French troops gave him his opportunity. It

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was not a major war, being occasioned by jealousy between the kings of France and Spain. Both of them were claimants to the throne of Germany, which carried with it domination over Austria and raised the occupant to the imperial dignity of Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. The King of Spain, Charles V, being of German origin, was preferred to his rival, and only a few years before, in 1520, had been crowned at Aix-la-Chapelle. The King of France, Francis I, was bitterly disappointed at this frustration of his ambitions and, imagining himself unfairly treated, sought revenge by sending his troops to invade Navarra and pillage and loot the countryside.

Troops were being enlisted all over Spain to defend the sacred soil of the motherland against the invaders. The wealthy landowner who was master of the household where the Majoral and John Ciudad were employed, was forming a company of infantry and was looking for recruits. John immediately enrolled in this company. The old spirit of adventure and of wanderlust awoke in him again, and he felt the blood pulsating in his veins at the thought of the new life opening up before him. He was resolved to acquit himself bravely on the field of battle and then to return to his little village, a hero.

Bidding farewell to the Majoral and his daughter had not been an easy task. Both the old man and the girl had shed tears at the moment of separation, and John himself, although he was too much of a man to weep, felt a lump in his throat as he said good-bye to the two persons whom, after his own mother and father, he held dearest in the world. The villagers turned out in force to

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watch the little company march off and, with the excitement of the waving and shouting, John soon forgot that painful leave-taking.

Life as a soldier proved very different to what he had fondly expected. There was nothing glamorous about it. On the physical side there were the long marches in all kinds of weather, the meagre and uncertain rations, the monotonous sentry-duty. On the moral side, there was the constant mixing with depraved characters, the heavy drinking, the quarrelsome gambling, and worse. Camp life was far from being a school of sanctity, and the erstwhile shepherd, in spite of his excellent upbringing, had deteriorated through the enforced association with rough soldiers. The first few nights in camp, he knelt down to say his prayers, but this action had evoked such a storm of ribald laughter and coarse jokes that he had not had the courage to repeat it. Gradually he assumed the swaggering gait and uncouth speech of a seasoned soldier. He acquired the habits of those men for whom moral behaviour had neither attraction nor meaning.

CHAPTER II

CRUSADING FOR CHRIST

We have seen John thrown from his charger, and almost raving beside the enemy lines. Gradually his mind cleared and he realised that in his half-comatose state, he had been re-living the events of past years. He saw his mistakes in their true light, and he understood how foolish he had been. If only God would give him the grace to amend, he would make better use of the future—but, if he were to have any future at all, he must devise some means of escaping from his present serious predicament, lying out there on a bleak hillside, seriously injured and too weak to move. There was every likelihood that the enemy would spot him and then it would be a long spell in a dreary dungeon, or maybe a mercifully quick death from the thrust of a sword. The thought of death brought to mind the state of his soul. How would he fare before the

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Judgement Seat of God if he were called at that instant to his final reckoning? What a sad change had come over him since he had joined the army! Now he committed sin without much twinge of conscience, and seldom if ever said any prayers or troubled about the sacraments.

In the moment of danger, a child turns instinctively towards its mother. So it was with John, in his moment of peril, his thoughts and hopes turned to his Blessed Mother in heaven. He had neglected her of late, causing her pain by his sinful ways, but a mother never ceases to love even the most wayward of sons. Surely Mary is not less loving than an earthly mother, so over and over again his lips formed the once so familiar prayer: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death."

As he murmured the words, the malice of his sins stood out accusingly before him. He had thought to play the man by giving up God, but he saw only too clearly that he had been a coward and a traitor. He had given up praying because he had not had the courage to kneel for fear that his comrades would laugh at him; becoming a partner in their crimes so that they would not mock at him as a "goody-goody." Human respect had conquered him: in wanting to be taken for a tough fellow, he had simply proved himself a weakling!

Nothing remained for him but to throw himself on the mercy of God, make an act of contrition, and trust that God would wipe away the guilt. He remembered once hearing in the village church the priest reading from the Gospel the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Was he not, indeed, another prodigal who had wandered far from his

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Father's house, yet yearned to return home? He found that all his actions had been so much empty bravado, bringing him no happiness. In a vain attempt to stifle the inner voice of conscience, he had plunged into excess after excess. Now it seemed as though a soothing balm were pouring over his tortured soul, as he turned in supplication to Mary.

Tradition has it that our Blessed Lady appeared there to John, and told him that her Divine Son had heard his prayer and would save him from danger on condition that he returned again in fidelity to his prayers and to the practise of his religion. This apparition has often been depicted by artists. Whatever be the reality, the fact remains that John was successful in eluding the French, and returned to his own lines, where he was welcomed back by his comrades who had given up their boon companion for lost.

That narrow escape from death was not without its effect on this young soldier. At the first opportunity, he went to confession and made his peace with God. His companions were quick to note the change in him: he no longer swore, gambled, drank, and, what was worse than all in their eyes, he had gone so far as to remonstrate with them for using blasphemous language. It was evident that not only had he reformed himself, but was bent on reforming them also! This was not to be tolerated for one instant. From that day onwards, they were his sworn enemies, and he was made to feel that by a series of petty persecutions, such as only such characters could devise.

As is often the case with the wicked, they could not

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forgive him for having deserted their ways, thus proving a reproach to them, and schemes were afoot to get even with him when chance should put him in their power. The chance presented itself sooner even than they had hoped. One of their officers was an avaricious man whose main object in life was to amass as much booty as he could. He had contrived to get together a large pile of goods, and, fearing that some one would rob him, he kept a soldier constantly on guard over his possessions. When it was John's turn as sentry, the other soldiers carried out their evil plan to injure him. Knowing his willing kindness, one of them went up and begged a small service which would necessitate his being absent from his post for a few moments. Not suspecting any foul play, John did what they had hoped he would do—left the pile unguarded. The plotters removed some of the goods and then hastened to inform the officer that he had been robbed. The latter flew into a rage, shrieked, stamped and swore at the innocent guard, ordering John to give back what he had taken or he would suffer for his theft. The accused man could only wait silently until the storm abated, but instead of subsiding, it increased in fury until the officer had worked himself into a state of frenzy. In his anger, he ordered the soldiers to hang John from the nearest tree.

This was the signal for which his erstwhile companions had been waiting. They surged forward and one of them seizing a rope, climbed up a tree and knotted it to a high branch. This was to be the gallows. Others took hold of the condemned man, and tying his hands behind his

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back, hoisted him on to a wagon and pushed it over to the place of execution. As John stood there shackled and helpless on the makeshift platform, he looked round at the upturned faces of the soldiers, in the hope of somewhere discovering a gleam of sympathy. There was no trace of pity on those hardened faces that had too often confronted death to set much value on life. There was, on the contrary, a sadistic gleam in their eyes as if the sight of a fellow-being about to writhe in his death agony afforded them a debased pleasure.

John's heart was beating fast. He was not yet thirty years of age, and life is sweet to a young man. What a sorry end to all his dreams of military fame and glory! What would those he cherished at Oropesa think of him, for it would be given out that he had been sentenced to death for the neglect of duty. This was his punishment for having sinned. He pictured himself hanging from the end of the rope that swayed just above his head, a cold sweat burst out on him and his whole body trembled. He looked around for some means of escape, but they had tied his hands too securely to permit him to loosen his bonds. Indeed, how could he flee, surrounded as he was by those who had plotted his death? Another moment and the noose would be around his neck and he would be swung clear of the wagon and into eternity. He could scarcely mumble a prayer with his parched tongue and bruised lips.

Just then, when all seemed about to end, there was a sudden movement among the crowd, and a man on horseback forced his way to the front. It was the com-

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mander of the company, and he summoned the officer concerned to him in order to find out the reason for this execution. He was a humane man who quickly realised that an injustice was being done, out of all proportion to the alleged crime. To his way of thinking, such a display of excessive severity was more likely to weaken than to improve discipline. Some punishment there should be, but it must not be so drastic. If the fellow had shown himself unfit to be in a position of trust, the best thing to do was to expel him from the ranks of the company. John was released from his bonds and there and then stripped of his uniform. The pitiless men formed two lines and he was made to run the gauntlet. As he passed between them, they struck and kicked and spat on him, so that, by the time he reached the end of the lines, his clothes were a mass of dirty rags and his face and body torn and bleeding. They then drove him out of the camp, like a pariah dog.

The events of the past two hours had been so cruelly bewildering, that it took him some time to gather his wits. As his mind cleared, his first thought was one of intense gratitude to God for having spared his life. There was a wayside Calvary on the road, and throwing himself on his knees at the feet of the Crucified, he poured out his heart in thankfulness for his deliverance. He arose after a little while, with a sense of having undergone a purification. God had allowed him to be punished for his past sins, and he realised how much he deserved all that he had just endured. A whole life of penance would not suffice to expiate his sins of ingratitude and immorality,

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but God helping him, he would dedicate the remainder of his life, be it long or short, to atonement. It may well have been the first stirrings of his vocation, his first discernment of what God had in store for him. Be that as it may, it was the turning point in his life.

Gratitude, relief, freedom—these had so filled his mind and heart that he had not paused to consider in what a very difficult position recent events had placed him. He was destitute, so that the only course that seemed possible was to return to Oropesa, but that lay far away, many miles away. How was he to fare with no money, in rags and disgrace? There was nothing for it but to set out on foot and hope to come across charitable people on the way who might give him a little food, and maybe let him lie in their barns at night. It would not be his first taste of the hard life of a tramp. Early in life, when he had run away from home, he had trudged for twenty long days from Montemor to Oropesa. But this journey proved a very different one to that undertaken by the child of eight years of age. On that first journey, people had been willing to help the priest and his little companion, but now he found closed doors and black looks. Nobody had any sympathy to spare for a deserter from the glorious army of their king, Charles V. None would waste their time with a coward such as that!

It was the humiliations rather than the actual physical hardships that caused John distress and pain. Hunger and weariness of the body were no new experiences for him, and no matter how indifferent or difficult people were in general, now and again he would meet with a peasant

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willing to share his humble crust with the wayfarer. As for sleeping in the open air, well that was no novelty for a shepherd. But to be treated as an object of contempt, that was what seared into his very soul. He had the quick pride and hot blood of a son of Portugal, and there were occasions when he found it almost impossible to restrain his anger. But God was operating in his soul, and preparing His future apostle of charity for a life of almost inconceivable humiliations and insults. John was, of course, quite unaware at this time, of the salutary apprenticeship he was serving, but his strengthening grasp of supernatural values made him accept the slights and taunts in expiation for his sins. So he continued to trudge his lonely way along the dusty roads of Spain. Outwardly he bore the appearance of a nondescript and rather unsavoury-looking tramp; inwardly, he was very pleasing to God.

His troubles came to an end for a time, when he reached Oropesa, for the Majoral and his daughter were so overjoyed to see him return to them that, welcoming him back, they made him forget all that had passed since his trial at the hands of the soldiers. His friends feigned not to notice his ragged clothes and unkempt appearance, and listened with ready sympathy whilst he recounted his adventures; then together, they thanked God for having spared his life. Thus encouraged, John took up the threads of his old life again, and went back to his job of shepherding flocks—but he was not the same man who had once led the sheep to graze. The reverses which he had undergone had broken down his pride, and through the breach

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there poured the saving waters of grace, cleansing and fortifying his soul to meet with what lay in the future. In the long vigils on the hills, all his thoughts were now centered on God. He saw in its true light the graceless life which he had led in the army, and the insult such an existence was to the Almighty. He had greatly offended God, and now longed to prove how very truly he had repented.

It was not long until an opportunity was offered to him to test this reformation. Mohammedan fanatics, under the leadership of Suleiman II, had once again burst in on Europe, and after blazing a trail of destruction across the Balkans, were almost at the gates of Rome. If Austria fell to the hordes, the road was open through Italy and the Sons of the Prophet would pour in upon the Eternal City, destroying the center of Catholicism. Faced with this dreadful menace, the Pope appealed to Catholic princes to drop their petty squabbles and unite against the common foe of Christianity. A Holy Crusade was proclaimed, and men of all nations rushed to take up arms to defend their faith and homes against the onslaught of the barbarians.

This call from the Holy Father himself to all men of good-will could not fail to find an echo in John's heart. Here was a war in which he could and should take part, without any fear of endangering his soul. Moreover, it might, perhaps, afford him the means of making amends for the sad figure he had cut in the war with the French. Much as he liked the life in Oropesa, he was never completely at his ease since the Majoral's proposal that he

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should marry the latter's daughter, and was always in fear that the offer would be renewed some day. So John enlisted once more as a soldier, and set off to fight the infidels.

The war did not last long, for the Christian armies gained a swift victory. Suleiman's army numbered some 300,000 strong, but the Emperor, Charles V, marched against him with 30,000 horse and 90,000 well-trained infantry, besides a prodigious hosting of irregulars. At the sight of these formidable forces advancing to meet each other, all Europe watched what would surely decide the fate of all that civilisation had gained through the slow centuries. Instead of the expected tremendous conflict, however, there were only some comparatively minor skirmishes. Suleiman, finding that the odds were against him, was not prepared to run the risk of defeat, preferring to retire with his warriors. Charles pursued him for some distance, but seeing that the Mohammedans were retreating back into Asia, called a halt to the advance and disbanded his army.

John's company returned to Spain by the sea route. Disembarking at Corunna, and all being volunteers, they proceeded to their own homes. He had no home to go to, however, for he had made up his mind this time not to return to Oropesa, where the question of marriage would probably be brought up again. Why he felt such a strong reluctance towards marriage, he could not have explained. Perhaps he may have had a vague presentiment that God would eventually call on him to perform some special

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work, and so he must steer clear of all personal obligations, the better to respond fully to the call.

In his uncertainty as to where to go, it occurred to him to return to Montemor-O-Novo, and there to try to find his parents whom he had not seen for close on thirty years. Impulsive as ever, he quickly made up his mind and set off on foot on the long journey of 300 miles to his old home. As a returning Crusader, he was treated with great respect in the villages and towns through which he passed, and having money saved from his army pay, he was able to buy food and so had no need to beg.

Did John expect to walk into his own home and be received by his parents as if he had only been away a few days instead of many years? We cannot pretend to give an answer to this question, because the whole subject of his running away from home is so shrouded in mystery. It is a most extraordinary thing for a boy to abandon his parents and, apparently, show no desire to return to them. Was he just a naughty youngster playing truant, who wandered so far away from his home that he could not get back on account of the difficulty of travel in those days—or was he, outside of his own volition, moved by divine inspiration? Knowing now, as we do, the sublime vocation to which he was called, we can well understand that he would require a very special preparation and, in God's design, separation from home and family may have been necessary. St. Teresa of Avila ran away from home when she was a child, to seek martyrdom in Africa. Even Our Blessed Lord left His Holy Mother and foster father

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at the age of twelve, in order, as He told them, "To be about My Father's business."

Whatever may have been the reason for his exiling himself, Montemor did not welcome home its prodigal son with any show of enthusiasm. John went from door to door, seeking news of the Ciudads, but all he got was a shake of the head and a blank look. There was nobody of that name living in the village now, they told him. At one house an old man stood at his door, and hearing the enquiry for the Ciudad family, gazed at him intently, a somewhat puzzled expression on his face. He beckoned the weary John to step inside, and questioned him as to where he had come from, and the full names of his parents. When he heard that the mother's maiden name was Duarte, he embraced John, telling him that Theresa Duarte was his sister and John must, therefore, be his long-lost nephew.

It was a pathetic story that the old man had to tell about the pilgrim's parents. His mother had been so broken-hearted when her little son had disappeared from home that she fell ill and died shortly afterwards. His father, thus alone in the world, without wife or child, became a lay-brother in a Franciscan monastery at Lisbon, and died there after a few years. We can well imagine John's grief and remorse as he realised the sorrow he had brought on his loving parents. Big, strong man though he was, he wept like a child. His uncle tried to console him, and even begged him to make his home with him. John, however, felt no attachment to Montemor. Rather would it be a constant reminder to him of his heartless

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conduct towards his devoted parents. Besides, he had become more Spanish than Portuguese after such a long absence from his native land, and it was better for him to work out his destiny in the country to which Providence had directed him. So, bidding farewell to his uncle, he turned his back on Montemor, and for the second time in his life followed the road to the Spanish frontier. Once over the border, he turned southwards towards the sea, and arriving at Ayamonte, a village on the Gulf of Cadiz, obtained employment at his old trade of shepherd.

CHAPTER III

RANSOMING CAPTIVES

John had now reached the age of thirty-eight, and it would seem a natural thing for him to settle down and make a home somewhere—if not as a married man, at least as a contented bachelor. But he could not take life easily, for during the long days on the hills with his sheep, he would reflect on its purpose, and saw that it had no meaning except as a preparation for the next world. To go through life merely seeking comfort and pleasure, could not correspond to the end for which God had created man. No, man must strive for higher motives to be worthy of the great natural and supernatural gifts that he possesses. There should be a constant aiming at a closer relationship with God, Who is the beginning and end of our whole existence. What prevents this union is sin.

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This awareness of his faults and his failings was ever with John, being to him evidences of the blackest ingratitude. As he cast his mind back over his past life, it appeared to be a complete failure—his mother's heart broken by his senseless running away from home; his father's life spoiled; God treated in the same shameful way. There was no other course open to him but to expiate his sins by a life of penance.

He pondered over this problem for two years before he eventually came to a definite conclusion. Then he decided on a heroic plan, that of going to Africa to ransom Christian captives from the hands of the Moors who infested the Mediterranean with their pirate ships, taking many prisoners. These same captives were kept as slaves and treated with barbarous cruelty when they refused to embrace the Mohammedan religion. There existed a religious order dedicated to this work of redeeming Christian slaves; for the Order of Trinitarians, founded towards the end of the twelfth century, had done wonderful work in that sphere. But John did not feel called to enter the religious life; he preferred to go to Africa and work on his own. He might find an opportunity to change places with some poor Christian slave, and there might even be a chance of martyrdom.

Relinquishing his work as a shepherd, he set out on foot for Gibraltar, where he hoped to board a vessel bound for Africa. During his journey, he stopped one night at a hospice for pilgrims and, finding a number of sick persons there, he offered to tend them. He was given the task of sweeping the ward, and other similar duties. He found

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this work greatly to his taste, for he felt that he was helping Christ in the persons of the suffering. Had he any inkling then that, later on, this was to become his own special vocation? It would seem not, for Almighty God was to lead him along diverse roads and subject him to many trials before revealing it to him. As he was leaving the hospice to continue his journey, he told the master of the place that he should consider himself blessed to have the privilege of serving the poor of Christ. He added that his own life had been mainly spent in tending animals, and he had noticed that too many people were more concerned about the welfare of their beasts than that of their fellowmen.

A few days later he arrived at Gibraltar, whence he intended going to Ceuta which lay just across the Straits. As he waited to board ship, a moving sight met his gaze. A man and five women were bidding farewell to some friends, and all were in tears. It was plain to be seen that this was no ordinary parting, but had some tragedy associated with it. John had a very tender heart, which was quickly aroused at the sight of others in trouble, and at the first opportunity he went to offer his sympathy to the little group. The tale they told him was sad, indeed. They were the Count Almeyda, his wife and daughters, who had incurred the displeasure of their sovereign through no known fault of their own, had been deprived of their estates in Portugal, and now were being banished to Ceuta.

It was clear to John that this family of noble birth, used to the ease and comforts of wealth and rank, would suffer

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intensely in Ceuta, which was little better than a penal settlement. His generous nature was touched at their plight, and he offered to go with them as their servant, until such time as they would have overcome the initial difficulties. The Count perceived that his humble benefactor was a man of integrity in whom he could place implicit trust, and the generous offer was gladly accepted.

Fortunate, indeed, it was that the sorely-tried family had John's help, or they might all have died. Scarcely were they ashore in Ceuta, when all became ill. The sickness which afflicted them was some kind of fever brought on by the intense heat and primitive living conditions of their new home. No doubt this malady was aggravated by their disappointments and their hopeless fear of the future. John was tireless in his devotion to their interests, looking after them himself, seeing in them a chance to serve Christ in the persons of those stricken with misfortune. Thanks to his unceasing attentions, none of them died, but with recovery their troubles were not over, not by any means. What little money they had managed to bring with them had been quickly spent on doctors and medicines, and they had no resources nor the means of securing further funds. The Count was too old to work, and his wife and daughters, having lived the easy life of gentlewomen, had neither training nor experience to fit them for employment. In their extremity, they turned to John, their faithful friend and indispensable helper. There was only one solution he could offer, and that was for him to find work at once, so as to earn sufficient for food and shelter for them all. The idea of abandoning

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them never once occurred to him, for he felt that God had placed the responsibility for their welfare on his shoulders. This conviction of his duty towards the unfortunate was to become so strong that he eventually considered himself bound in conscience to help all the sick and afflicted.

The possibilities of employment in Ceuta were restricted and unremunerative. The only job available to John was on the fortifications that were being erected around the city. The Portuguese had lost most of their possessions in North Africa to the Moors, and were making frantic efforts to prevent themselves being driven out of their last strip of territory. Convicts were sent from Portugal to build the ramparts, but, as there were not enough even of these to raise the defences rapidly, extra laborers were always needed. The work was tremendously hard, but the physical exertions were not the worst part of it. Loading and unloading barrows all day was a back-breaking job, but John's muscles were tough as steel. What was particularly revolting was the inhuman treatment inflicted on the workmen by their overseers. The men were driven like beasts of burden, and curses, blows and lashes of the whips were their constant and common lot. Added to this, the pay was miserable, and it was not unusual for the laborers to be defrauded even of this poor pittance, by their cruel and avaricious masters.

John took his place among these poor wretches, and had to endure the same ill-treatment. All day long the torrid African sun blazed down mercilessly on their ill-covered bodies, as they hauled the heavy stones to build

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the walls, and removed the clay and debris from the excavations. Woe betide them if they paused an instant to rest, for a stroke of the lash would whistle through the air, ripping open the skin of face or body.

In the evenings when the scanty wages were doled out, John would hasten home to give the money to his charges so that they could buy a little food. Then he cooked supper, afterwards often working far into the night—while the others slept—cleaning the little house and mending clothes. Early each morning he was back at work on the fortifications.

John won the confidence of one of his fellow-workers. This man had a sensitive nature and suffered so keenly from the effects of the endless toil and brutal treatment, that at times he almost gave way to despair, talking of killing himself, and thus ending the misery of his existence. Well, indeed, could John appreciate his state of mind, for there came moments when he, too, felt his courage failing under the well-nigh superhuman task which he had set himself. Nevertheless, he did his best for the unfortunate man, encouraging and inducing him to accept these sufferings in expiation for all that he had done during life to offend God. What distressed John most was that the authors of all this injustice and grief were Christians, at least in name. They attended Mass on Sundays, and some of them made a great display of their seeming piety. It was this which made John's companion feel so bitter, and often he would ask his friend how it was that those who professed to be followers of Christ should so ignore His precept of loving their fellow-men,

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while the followers of Mohammed welcomed with open arms those who embraced their religion. It was a hard question, and only by untiring example could John convince him that all Christians were not so inhuman nor so unworthy.

John's life as a shepherd had not brought him into very close contact with the world, but now he was seeing it at its ugliest. On the one hand, he witnessed wealth and power combined with a supreme disdain for the rights and welfare of those in subjection. On the other hand he saw the poor grovelling in rags and starvation, with none ready to extend a helping hand or cast a glance of pity on them. And this tolerated in a society that prided itself on being exemplifiers of Christianity! What a travesty of the teachings of the Divine Master with regard to the duties of brotherly love.

One day his companion was missing. First it was rumoured that he had left Ceuta, but later the news leaked out that he had fled to the Moors and had apostatized. He was yet another example of the many who sought to find amongst the infidels a charity they could not win from their fellow-Christians.

The thought of this tragic apostasy obsessed John. Being of a strongly passionate nature, the realisation that his friend had had to flee to the loathed Moors to seek protection from the brutality of the Christians made his heart flame with indignation. He saw around him evidences of lives of complete selfishness; the workers exploited and oppressed in order to increase and secure the pleasure and comfort of those in authority. Even

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more dreadful in his eyes was the undeniable fact that this same spirit of greed and selfishness was not unknown in the ranks of the clergy and religious, some of whom seemed indifferent to their duties and obligations towards those who should have been their first and greatest care.

The excessive fatigue and degrading working conditions had brought on the self-appointed guardian a nervous exhaustion, and the thought kept nagging at him that he, too, should escape from a corrupt society and seek among the Moors the kindness and tolerance that were now denied to him and to his fellows. It was a very terrible temptation against the Faith in which he had been born and lived, and for weeks he was in mental torture. Finally, one day he did the only safe thing for one in his frame of mind—he went into a church to talk it over with a priest. It was an old Franciscan friar who received him and listened in silence and with close attention while John told him of his troubled soul, which he had the grace to recognise as being in sore danger from the temptation of his despairing thoughts.

When all had been revealed to the priest, he spoke earnestly to his penitent, admitting that there were many Catholics who shamefully neglected the practice of the virtue of charity. He stressed, however, that the blame must be put on them, not on the religion which they disgraced, for the precept of Christ. "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself," could never be changed or set aside by any human being. It was not Christianity that had failed, but those who deliberately refused to live up to its Commandments and teachings. The priest

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then counseled John not to run away from his Faith, but rather should he feel bound to live it in its fulness. The early Christians won over their persecutors, not by controversy or doubts, but by cherishing their faith to such an extent that even the prejudiced Romans were forced to exclaim: "See how they love one another!" Charity in action had accomplished what preaching or argument could never have done.

As John listened to this advice, a new warmth filled his heart, and he felt again the burning desire to follow in the steps of the Master, and dedicate his life to the service of his neighbor. There was so much suffering in the world, that he longed with all his soul and mind to be able to relieve even some part of it. He spoke of this desire to his confessor, who told him to return to Spain at once, and there in His own good time, God would make known to him His will. Africa was not a suitable place for a man of his temperament, and it did not seem likely that God was calling him to labor for the redemption of captives. Indeed, if he continued to remain there, he might easily lose his own soul.

It was Almighty God making known to Him the course to follow, through the instrumentality of his spiritual director, and John realised it. Worried as to how he was to reconcile obedience to this command with his duty to his charges, he spoke of the obligation he had assumed towards the Portuguese family. The wise old Franciscan friar assured him that it was imperative that he should leave them, since nothing was of greater importance than the salvation of his own soul, endangered all the time he

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remained on African soil. The Count and his family to whom John had been such a generous benefactor and supporter, were distracted and broken-hearted at the news of his impending departure. When he had gone, they would be left destitute, for to whom could they turn? But Providence rewarded John's unquestioning obedience for a few days later the Count received word that the king had pardoned him and he could return to his estates in Portugal, which were now restored to him and to his family. We can imagine how their sorrow was swiftly turned into joy, and with what effusive gratitude they took leave of their devoted friend and helper. We can also imagine with what relief of mind John saw in this unexpected stroke of good fortune for his charges the ready relieving of his own anxiety concerning them. Despite his willingness to obey the priest and depart for Spain, their fate would have been a constant trouble to his mind if he had had to leave them behind him, alone and defenseless.

The sea journey from Ceuta to Gibraltar is not one covering any great distance, but the passage can be exceedingly rough. As the vessel on which John had embarked was about half-way across the Straits, a violent storm blew up, threatening to submerge the little craft. Sailors and passengers alike were panic-stricken, as it seemed beyond doubt that the boat could not ride the waves, and death was very close. All that same morning John had been dwelling on his sins, particularly that crime of toying with the temptation of denying Christ and joining the pagan Moors. Unable, in the stress of mind in which he was, to keep his thoughts to himself, he cried

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aloud that the tempest was raging because they had for a fellow-passenger a great sinner such as he. Driven almost crazy with fear and superstition, some of the crew were ready to throw him into the sea, but God intervened and the storm abated. John thus lived to reach Spain and the start of his destined mission in life.

CHAPTER IV

APOSTOLATE OF THE PRESS

Back once more on Christian soil, John's first action was to enter a church and kneel before a crucifix, thanking the Lord for having delivered him from such great peril in Africa, and for having saved his life at sea. Then he made a solemn vow to devote the remainder of his life to God's service, under His guidance. Not only would he strive to avoid sin, even the slightest venial fault, but would henceforth perform all his actions for the honor of God and His glory; for it was clear now that in the past, much of what he had done had been influenced by purely natural motives. Such motives were not necessarily sinful, but they kept him away from God, and what he yearned for more than all else was a close union with his Maker. He realised that the only perfect way to achieve

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this union was to do everything with the sole intention of pleasing God; to be constantly preoccupied with that wonderful utterance of St. Paul: "I live now, not I, but Christ liveth in me."

In the meantime, there was the problem to be faced of earning his daily bread, and as, in a sea-port town, the most likely place to find work is around the docks, it was there he betook himself. When the foreman cast an eye over the applicant's sturdy frame, he was not slow in hiring him. The work was very heavy, for all day long John was engaged in helping to load and unload cargoes, often having to clamber up and down the gangways, bent under huge piles of planks. At other times, he would be confined in stuffy holds, amidst sacks of pungent spices. It was labor that only the strongest men could continue to keep up, but it came somewhat easily to John, because his naturally sound constitution had been toughened by an outdoor life and exposure to all sorts of weather, and he had great powers of endurance.

Contented at his work, he gave his employers full value for the wages paid him, and was well liked by his co-workers, though he did not mix much with them, preferring his own company. They realised that this reserve did not spring from any notion of superiority, but from a deeply religious spirit given to contemplation. Again, they found him pleasant, not gloomy in manner, ready to laugh at a joke, a smile never far from his eyes. Yet, what they appreciated most was his charity; if one of them were sick or in trouble, John seemed always to be the first to learn of it, and there was nothing he would not undertake

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in order to help. Money, time, service—everything he possessed was at the disposal of the needy one.

Of an evening he would pay a visit to one or other of the churches in the town, and there remain a long time in prayer before the tabernacle. Returning to his lodgings, he would read, for he was always eager for instruction and knowledge. The education he had received in the little school at Oropesa had not covered much ground, so he was ever striving to supplement it by his own efforts. His reading included the lives of the saints, and he often thought how good it would be for the souls of young people if such sound literature could be put into their hands, and win their attention. Reading was a popular pastime, and among the spiritual writers were Louis of Granada, St. Peter of Alcantara, Blessed John of Avila, while a little later were to appear the works of those wonderful mystics, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. Books treating of chivalry and knightly adventure were eagerly sought. St. Teresa herself tells us that in her young days she was much addicted to this type of literature, and found it difficult to give up the taste for such reading. The popular theme was that of a brave knight attempting great deeds of valor to win the hand of a fair lady. Romances were widely read by the young, and many of these stories were of doubtful moral themes.

John was not a learned man, but he was possibly in advance of his time in appreciating the power for good or evil contained in the printed word; so it is not surprising that Catholic booksellers have taken him as their patron. He decided that he would work for God by selling

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good books. Impulsive as ever, to think with him was to act; and, with the little he could save from his dock wages, he purchased his stock—principally lives of the saints, catechisms, prayer books and holy pictures. He did not attempt to sell learned treatises, because his clients in the main would be simple country folk, without the education or inclination for that type of book. It speaks much for his broad-minded commonsense, that among this stock was included a goodly number of the more popular romances of the day. His reason for this was to render his wares more attractive. Many young people would not give a second glance at his books, if they thought they were all dealing with religion but, seeing the current favorites displayed, their curiosity might be aroused, and they would stop to inspect the stock. Then it was up to John to persuade them to buy a worth-while book, instead of a trashy one.

Not having the means to rent a shop, he started out as an itinerant bookseller, traveling from village to village, carrying his wares in a sack slung over his shoulders. Coming to a likely spot, the sack was laid on the ground, and he arranged his books in as attractive a manner as possible, displayed a few gaudy signs, and waited for customers. These were not long in coming, for whenever possible, he chose fair days when the crowds would be gathered to buy and sell in the markets. Naturally, the little children were the first to arrive, attracted by the brightly coloured signs, and John was very willing to explain their meaning. There was Daniel in the lion's den, Jesus walking on the waters, the Good Samaritan. Rewarded with a holy picture, the children ran back to

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their parents, and in turn the parents and older boys and girls came to inspect the pedlar and his goods. First, John would talk to them about the "best-sellers" of the day, then gradually the conversation would be led round to the spiritual works, which he had such a persuasive way of presenting that he rarely failed to effect a sale. He was always ready to bring down the prices to suit the purses, for he was in that business to benefit souls, not to make monetary profits.

One sultry day, while tramping towards a village, with his load of books on his shoulders, he overtook a little boy, bare-footed and poorly clothed. The surface of the road was rutted and strewn with sharp stones, and the small feet were cut and bruised. The poor child seemed so uncomfortable that John took off his own shoes and offered them to the wee fellow. The shoes were too large, of course, and were handed back with a sweet smile. Anxious to save the little one further discomfort, John lifted him on to his shoulders, and putting the sack across his arm, set off again. Strangely, the child who had seemed so light and small when standing on the road, now became a very heavy burden on John. Indeed, the latter was forcibly reminded of St. Christopher, who had undergone a similar experience while carrying a beggar on his back, only to find in the end that it was Christ Whom he had carried. Although a vigorous man, the weight of the child and the heat of the sun were too much for him, and coming to a spring that trickled by the wayside, John set down child and sack, and knelt to drink the cool water.

His thirst satisfied, he felt sufficiently refreshed to re-

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sume his loads, but first he looked to see if the child also wished to drink. To John's amazed eyes, the child was a different being to the dusty little boy he had borne on his shoulders. A radiance shone around him, and in his hand he held a half-opened pomegranate, surmounted by a cross. Addressing himself to the startled man, the child uttered these mysterious words: "John of God, Granada shall be thy cross." Thereupon, he vanished from sight. Tradition has always seen in this incident an apparition of the Divine Infant to His future saint. It is the first occasion that the name "John of God" is spoken. John did not adopt this title until much later, when it was imposed on him by a bishop. This prelate gave him a type of religious habit, while insisting that he should be known by the name which had been given him in such a wonderful manner. It was not an uncommon form of appellation for that period, for certain religious used somewhat similar names. St. Teresa of Avila was known as Mother Teresa of Jesus, and another of John's contemporaries is known to us as St. John of the Cross. The name clung to John Ciudad, and it is as St. John of God that the Church has canonised him. During the 400 years that have elapsed since his holy death, his spiritual sons have carried it proudly to the four ends of the earth, and they glory in the title bestowed on them by Holy Church—Hospitaller Brothers of St. John of God.

CHAPTER V

BLOSSOMING OF SANCTITY

John had understood from the Child's message that he was to go to Granada. Returning to his lodgings in Gibraltar, he packed up his few belongings, and then set off on foot for that city which was not so far distant. If Granada was to be his cross—God's will be done!

Granada was indeed a historic city. When the Moors from Africa conquered a large part of Spain in the eighth century, they made it their capital, decorating it with many gems of Arabic architecture and filling it with mosques. The palace of the Alhambra, which stood on a hill overlooking the city, was the home of their ruler. It was a place of enchanting beauty with its magnificent hanging gardens. The reconquest of Spain was slow, and it was not until 1492 that Granada fell to the forces of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella.

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For eight years, the Spaniards had been waging war against the Moorish kingdom of Granada, which contained three million inhabitants. One by one the various towns and fortresses fell into their hands, until there remained only the capital to be conquered. But taking this was no child's play. Two mighty fortresses, a thousand towers, immense walls, and thirty thousand picked troops defended it. The Spaniards surrounded it with fifty thousand soldiers and prepared to starve the garrison into submission. The Moors made many attempts to break out, but they were always driven back. To let the Moors realise their unshakeable determination to conquer Granada, Ferdinand and Isabella turned their camp into a regular city with houses and streets, naming it Santa Fè.

The Moors were finally driven to despair when they saw the unshaken resolution of the Spaniards. They asked for a truce, and consented under terms of mild and honorable treatment to surrender their capital city. Ferdinand and Isabella took possession of Granada in 1492—three years before John's birth. They granted to Boadbil, King of the Moors, an annual income of 50,000 ducats and extensive estates in exchange for his kingdom. It was a generous way of treating a defeated enemy, and reflected great credit on their Catholic majesties.

Notwithstanding all these advantages, Boadbil, as he was leaving Granada, gazed back at it for the last time, unable to refrain from shedding tears. His mother, who was evidently more of a warrior than he, said sarcastically: "You do well to weep like a woman over the loss of a kingdom which you were unable to retain as a man."

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Boadbil's subjects were allowed to choose either to return to Africa or to remain in Spain. Many preferred to stay in Spain and a great number of them became Christians, but their conversion was not always very sincere.

Tradition has retained for us the exact date when John made his entry into Granada. It was the month of September, 1536. The guards and the idlers who were lounging about the Elvira gate, which led through the wall of a hundred towers, hardly cast a second glance at the big, shaggy-looking pedlar who strode past with vigorous steps, a pack of books strapped to his back. This time John rented a little shop in the neighbourhood of the Elvira gate. The front of it opened on to the street. There he set out his books, and hung up the posters depicting various sacred scenes. The effect was colourful, and likely to attract attention. The proprietor was usually to be seen outside his shop and, when the children crowded around, he would explain to them the meaning of the various posters. He was happy in the company of children, and before they ran back to their play he often gave them a few pictures. With young people and adults, he would discuss the merits of his books. He read them himself while waiting for customers, and again in the evenings, so that he was well acquainted with their contents. His aim was to do good to souls and to encourage them to read suitable books, but his zeal was discreet.

Although now he had a shop of his own, he did not for that reason cease to be a pedlar. He frequented the market places in the city, and wherever a crowd gathered, he would spread out his stock of literature and try to

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make people interested in them. In this way he soon became a well-known figure in Granada.

In spite of a busy life, John did not neglect his own sanctification. As he trudged through the town with his pack, he would visit the churches he passed on his way. This was an epoch when church-building went on apace. Wealth was flowing into Spain from the newly-discovered lands of America. Shortly after the taking of Granada, Ferdinand and Isabella had erected a sumptuous royal chapel, and a cathedral was being built to enclose it. There were also churches dedicated to St. Ildephonse, St. Jerome, St. Matthias and St. Sebastian.

John would prostrate himself in front of the Blessed Sacrament in one or other of these churches, and there pour out his heart to his Maker. The thought of his past sins and infidelities was always in his mind, so he would beseech God to pardon him and send him some suffering or humiliation whereby he might the more completely expiate them. Also, he would repeat with St. Paul: "Lord, what will Thou have me to do?" He felt that Almighty God destined him for some special work. By now he had reached the age of forty-one. Most men have found their vocation long before this, but John was still groping for his. In spite of prayers and ardent desires, God had not yet revealed it to him. Manifestly, a lengthy preparation was required because of the sublimity of the work to which he would be called.

The feast of St. Sebastian occurred in the month of January. A large crowd always thronged the saint's

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church in Granada on that day, but on this occasion the crowd promised to be much greater because of the fame of the preacher who was to deliver the sermon. It was none other than Father John of Avila, a priest distinguished both for sanctity and learning. He was the confessor and guide of many saints, among them St. Teresa of Avila, St. Francis Borgia, Ven. Louis of Granada, and has himself been beatified by the Church. First destined to go as a missionary to Mexico, his superiors seeing the devotion and sincerity with which he celebrated Mass, retained him in Spain where he became the Apostle of Andalusia.

John, of course, was present on such an important occasion. As the preacher appeared in the pulpit, the whole congregation turned towards him with anticipation. He was their hero, nor were they disappointed by his sermon. In vibrant phrases he painted for them the picture of the holy martyr at the crisis of his life, when he had to choose between Christ and Caesar, between the church militant and the Roman eagle. His choice must be either God or the world, and renouncing the latter, he had died for his faith, his body cruelly pierced with arrows.

The preacher then asked: "How many of us have the courage of St. Sebastian? Do we not rather drag ourselves along in a cowardly attempt to compromise between God and the world, between heaven and earth? We are too timorous to give ourselves wholly to God and, in consequence, we are constantly buffeted about between God

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and the creature. We know no peace of mind, and we shall never find happiness until we throw ourselves into the arms of our Maker.”

These words left their mark on the soul of John. He seemed to see himself as a coward hesitating between God and the world. In spite of all the graces and solicitations he had received from Almighty God, what had he made of his life? He had been a runaway child who had broken his mother's heart; a bad soldier dismissed from the service; one who toyed with the idea of reneging the Christian religion to embrace that of Mahomet. His sins rose up before him in all their ugliness as so many insults offered to Almighty God. He, a creature, had dared to defy His Creator, had attempted to usurp God's rights, making his own pleasure and satisfaction the arbiters of his conduct and rejecting God's precepts as being an interference with his liberty. The thought of his sinfulness and unworthiness took possession of his mind. He deserved to be blotted off the face of the earth. Like Cain, he should bear the mark of the wrath of God and be despised and shunned by men. He was stained with the leprosy of sin; let men ill-treat him and drive him from their habitations like a beast accursed.

It is only to great souls that God reveals all the hideousness of sin. As they contemplate the awful majesty and power of God, they are appalled at their own temerity in having dared to disobey by even venial faults. And as they think of the love and patience of their Heavenly Father, their hearts are torn with remorse at having given Him the slightest offence. We who treat sin so lightly,

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whose sorrow is more a selfish concern lest we should be punished in Hell than a genuine regret at having offended God, cannot understand the penances and expiations of the saints. To us, their insistence on doing violent penance is a pious exaggeration bordering on the morbid.

So long as he was in church, John was able to contain himself, but once outside on the square, his feelings overmastered him. He groaned aloud, declaring that he was a sinner, and, taking up a stone, he beat his breast with it in sign of contrition. Then, remorse overcoming him altogether, he tore at his hair and beard, and threw himself on the ground in the attitude of one in despair. The people stood around and looked on, for they were not unused to violent demonstrations of religious feeling. The Latin races do not possess the same inhibitions as the more northern and colder-blooded Anglo-Saxons. To them there is nothing wrong in displaying outwardly one's emotions. Moreover, the Spanish character is easily carried to extremes.

But John did not desist after a short time. All the way home he kept beating his breast and calling on God for forgiveness. Naturally, this drew a crowd of disreputable followers who, scenting a bit of sport at his expense, kept up a chorus of mockery and cat-calls. The youngsters, feeling themselves safe, threw stones and mud so that in a short time John's clothes were in a sorry condition. When he arrived at his shop he seized hold of all the secular books he had in stock and started to tear them up. Evidently, he looked upon the selling of such books as a concession to the worldly spirit. In his new-found zeal

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he was determined to have no truck with the world, even in its innocent amusements. When he had destroyed all the romances and novels, he began to distribute the devotional books among the bystanders. Soon there was commotion, even fighting among the crowd. A few moments before they had been slinging mud at this man; now that he was giving things away, even if it were only prayer-books, they were all his friends.

When all his books were gone, he handed over what little money he possessed to the poorest-looking among the crowd, so that he stood bereft of all things. He was obeying to the letter the injunction of Our Blessed Lord: "If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast and give to the poor, and come follow Me." It was a repetition of the gesture of St. Francis of Assisi, who stripped himself of his clothes, laid them at his father's feet, and then went out into the world to serve Christ in poverty.

But John's unusual act of penance was not momentary. The next day he was out in the streets again, beating his breast and calling on God to forgive him. He was soon followed by the same crowd of urchins, who had already forgotten his generosity of the previous day and were out to jeer him. Some charitable people, wishing to spare him these humiliations, and knowing his penance to be the result of yesterday's sermon, begged him to go with them to Father John of Avila. John readily consented to visit the illustrious preacher. What passed between the confessor and his penitent we do not know, but we can surmise that the priest sensed the genuineness and sanctity of the man kneeling at his feet from the fact that he

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became his spiritual director and guided him to the most sublime heights of holiness. What may appear surprising to us is that John of Avila allowed his penitent to continue his self-chosen form of penance.

Back on the streets of the town, John recommenced to beat his breast and to cry aloud for mercy. His arrival was greeted with delight by all the "no-goods" and idlers. This time they set up the cry: "madman." What else could a person be who acted in the strange way that John was acting? Even those who were well disposed towards him could think of no other explanation for his abnormal behaviour.

On hearing himself branded as insane, John felt happy. In his view, the only way to cleanse and purify his soul from the stains of sin and worldliness was for him to be despised and humiliated. He wanted to imitate Our Blessed Lord in the folly of the Cross. He longed to model himself on Him Who for our sakes became "like a worm and no man, the reproach of men and the outcast of the people" (*Ps. 21*). Jesus had been struck and spat upon by the soldiers of the High Priest. Herod had garbed Him in the white robe of a fool. The Roman soldiery had treated him as a plaything; having crowned His sacred head with thorns and covered His shoulders with an old purple cloth, they bowed before Him in derision and spat upon Him in mockery.

John felt that he was now walking in the footsteps of the Saviour. The fact of his becoming the laughing stock of Granada seemed to liberate something within him. He was no longer bound by the trammels of earth; the

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last bulwarks of his pride had broken down, and grace had flowed in to take complete possession of his soul. God was perfecting His servant, for to carry out aright the task that was to be confided to him, he needed virtue in the highest degree. To become a useful instrument in the hands of God, he needed to be purified of all self-seeking, all self-consciousness. Hence the magnitude of the trial to which he was subjected. Few men would have had the humility to accept with equanimity the reputation of being insane, but John not only accepted it, he glorified in it. As the rough mob shouted after him "fool," "madman," he threw himself on the ground and rolled in the mud as if he would prove to them that they were right.

But there were still a few people in Granada who did not regard the baiting of an apparent lunatic as a form of entertainment. They were pained at seeing the pious bookseller, whom they had come to esteem, receiving such outrageous treatment at the hands of the scum of the town. Being evidently men of distinction who were ashamed of the exhibition of cruelty given by their fellow-townsmen, they went up to the victim and withdrew him from the midst of the crowd.

CHAPTER VI

FOLLY OF THE CROSS

The place to which these good men took John was the Royal Hospital of Granada. They reasoned that as his behaviour had not been changed by a visit to Father John of Avila, the only thing left to do was to put him in the hands of the doctors. The director of the hospital received him kindly, but as soon as the gentlemen had departed, he had him sent to the section reserved for lunatics. John did not make any protest. He was happy when the mob in the street had treated him as a lunatic. He was ready to continue in that rôle and to accept whatever Providence had in store for him. His first biographer, who narrates the facts not long after the saint's death, describes as follows the treatment meted out to him: "The principal medicine given to that type of patient was the whip. They were also tied down, so that through the

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combined effect of pain and restraint, they might lose their ferocity and return to their normal selves. John was stripped, tied hand and foot, and with a double cord given a good beating."

We are naturally inclined to cry out in horror at such a brutal conception of the method of treating mental patients. No doubt, it was an age of rough treatment, but we must remember that floggings were frequently administered, even for minor offences, until very close to our own day. Parents flogged their children as a matter of duty. They were firm believers in the maxim "Spare the rod and spoil the child."

What is known as shock treatment plays a very important part in the present-day cure of many psychoses. For instance, we have electric shock therapy, insulin shock therapy. These treatments have no other therapeutic basis than that of administering a shock to the body. From time immemorial it has been found that shock in some form or other produces a happy remedial effect on those suffering from insanity. Most of these forms of shock treatment have been discarded to-day because they made the patient suffer. Not many years ago, excited patients were fastened in a cage and cold water was played on their body from a hose.

In judging the merits of past forms of therapy, we must remember that pain could not be dispensed with, and was accepted as a necessary evil. Anæsthesia is a comparatively recent invention. Prior to its day, when a surgical operation was about to be performed in a hospital, a bell was rung and stalwart attendants came run-

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ning to hold down the patient and stifle his cries. We can imagine the sufferings that a patient would undergo in having a leg amputated, with nothing whatsoever to ease the pain. And still, that was part and parcel of surgery until less than a hundred years ago.

This does not mean that the floggings which John received can be passed off as a normal and enlightened mode of treatment. They were not. They indicated in those who administered them a debased streak and a cruel disregard for the sufferings of others. But we need not think that they were inspired solely by cruelty. There was probably some idea of remedial action present, however crudely it might be expressed.

This flogging was renewed every day. We can imagine the awful sufferings that John thus experienced. Why did he endure all this? Naturally, we cannot pretend to know his motives, but from his intense desire to do penance, we can infer that he wished to imitate Our Blessed Lord ever more closely. Now, Our Divine Saviour was scourged at the pillar. Although finding his prisoner innocent, Pilate ordered Him to be flogged, so as to appease the brutal hatred of the Jews. In its mystical sense, this scourging denotes the expiation which Our Lord underwent in order to atone for our sins of the flesh.

John wished to follow in the footsteps of his Divine Master. He would taste of every bitter experience that Jesus had gone through. His apparent folly gave him the opportunity of suffering intense pain like his Master, while at the same time it was a means of expiating his own sins and of bringing his body under subjection. The

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vocation to which he was soon to devote himself required him to have such an extraordinary mastery over his body that it is not surprising that such a rigorous preparation should have been necessary. Among the letters which he wrote at a later date, and which have been preserved for us, there is one addressed to a titled lady which gives us an indication of his sentiments with regard to the mortification of the body.

“My good Duchess, if we consider carefully this present life we shall see that it is nothing else than a continual warfare as long as we remain in this valley of tears. We are constantly being persecuted by three mortal enemies, the devil, the world and the flesh. The world attracts us by its vices and its riches. It promises us a long life, saying: ‘you are young, have a good time, enjoy yourself, it will be time enough to think of repentance when you are old.’

“The devil is always setting traps in order to make us fall and to harm us. He tries to prevent us from doing good and being charitable. He inspires us with an exaggerated love of the goods of this world, so that we become forgetful of God and the care which we should have to preserve our soul pure and pleasing in His sight. When we have finished one affair he persuades us to engage in another and always to put off the amendment of our life to a later date. Thus we never manage to escape from the toils of the demon until comes the hour of our death, and then

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we shall see how false was all that the world and the devil promised us. But the Lord will judge us as He finds us at the hour of our death and, for that reason, it is well to mend our ways in time and not be like those who are always putting it off till to-morrow.

“Our other enemy, which is the worst, because it is one that we carry about with us, seeks by flattering attentions to lead us into perdition. This is the flesh, our body, which desires only to eat well, drink well, sleep well, be well dressed, do little work and satisfy all the desires of our carnal nature and of our vanity.

“In order to overcome these three enemies, we have need of the grace and of the assistance of Jesus Christ. We must despise self and trust only in Our Lord, confessing our sins humbly at the feet of our confessor, performing the penance imposed on us and resolving never more to sin. If we have the misfortune to sin, we must confess it truthfully. In this way can we hope to overcome the three enemies of which I have spoken. We must not trust in ourselves, otherwise we shall fall into sin a thousand times a day. We must put our trust in Jesus Christ and refrain from sinning for His sake. We must not grumble nor do evil, nor judge our neighbour nor do to him other than what we would have others do to us. Let us desire that all should be saved; and let us love Jesus Christ and serve Him for His own sake and not through fear of hell.”

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Father John of Avila had not forgotten his penitent. After some time he began to make inquiries about him, and learned that he was in the insane section of the hospital. He visited him and, from John's lips, heard the story of his life there. He decided that it had been going on long enough and bade John desist. It had lasted just forty days, the length of the fast and penance performed by Our Lord in the desert prior to commencing His public life of preaching and teaching. John's strange form of penance was explained to the directors of the hospital by Father John of Avila. They immediately discontinued their treatment, which, perhaps, they looked upon as being responsible for his cure. He was at once transferred to another section and given the freedom of the hospital.

It would have been a natural thing for John to return to his avocation of bookseller, but he had taken a fancy to the hospital and wished to stay there a little longer. As he was of an active, energetic nature, he could not remain idle, and so started to help the attendants with their work. It did not take him long to see that the treatment of the patients left much to be desired. The hospital had been erected by their Catholic Majesties, Ferdinand and Isabella, who were motivated by a sincere desire to bring relief to the sick and the infirm, but those in charge of the hospital were not living up to the charitable intentions of their Majesties. Money destined for the care of the sick was being squandered on banquets for the directors. The underlings took their cue from their masters, neglected the patients and left them dirty and uncared-for. Particularly was this so in the section for the insane.

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John felt profoundly sad at this shameful neglect of the sick. To him the work of tending the ailing and infirm was not just a job, it was something very much higher, a sacred vocation, almost a priesthood. Just as the priest holds in his hands the Body of Jesus in the Mass, so those who minister to the sick, wash and feed and bandage and soothe the pain of the Body of Our Lord. For has He not told us Himself that whatever we do to even the least of His brethren, we do to Himself. To John it appeared as bordering on sacrilege to neglect the patients.

In his own limited way he determined to do what he could to help the patients and improve their condition. He threw himself whole-heartedly into the task; having been a patient himself, he had learned by practical experience what was lacking. He set to work, first of all, to introduce some elementary notions of hygiene into the hospital. In the ward where he worked, he went round from bed to bed every day and washed the patients' hands and faces. He then swept the floor carefully and saw that everything was clean.

John's charity shone out especially in his devotion to invalids. He was at their service day and night, and would hasten to their beds at the first sign, to do anything for them that they desired. There was no task too humiliating or too unpleasant. In fact, the more distasteful it was, the more pleased was he to do it. The humiliations in the streets of Granada and the floggings in the hospital had tamed both his pride and his sensuality. From now on, the spirit would be master over the body.

John was a man of no mean intelligence. In his spare

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time he would ponder over the problems that daily contact with the sick brought to his notice. The problem of human suffering was plainly displayed before his eyes. Why should all these people who were in the hospital have to lie in pain during weeks, months and, perhaps, years? He was too profoundly religious to believe, as many people in our modern days appear to do, that God must be either unjust or indifferent towards man to allow him to suffer. He had just been through a long trial of physical and mental agony himself, and he had come out of it purified and sanctified in body and soul. But he realised that suffering is not always beneficial to the soul. Suffering can turn us into saints or devils: it all depends on how we endure it. And in the hospital he saw many who, instead of accepting their ills with Christian resignation, rebelled against their fate. This only added to their misery, for their bodily pain was made even more unbearable by the loss of peace of mind.

He saw clearly that if a hospital is to fulfil its function, it must provide treatment for both body and soul. Man is not just an animal. It is not enough to heal his body. He may be suffering from some ailment of soul which prevents his enjoying any happiness. The only way to heal his body is through religion. It is not sufficient to provide a chaplain. No matter how zealous such a priest may be, he can only have a passing contact with the patients. What is wanted, if a hospital is completely to fulfil its purpose, is an atmosphere impregnated with the charity of God. The nursing staff, which is in such constant and close contact with the patients, must be composed of

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persons whose own lives are animated by the holy purpose of serving God and helping their neighbour in his material and spiritual needs.

John saw distinctly what was needed, but the moment had not yet come for him to provide it. Almighty God would see to that in His own good time, and in the meantime John was to serve his apprenticeship to the hospitaller life. There was no State registration or recognised courses for nurses in those days. No doubt, the practice of the healing arts was much simpler then than in our own time, but there are certain fundamental requirements that have never changed. No one can be a successful nurse without a readiness for self-sacrifice. Technical efficiency, however desirable in itself, is practically useless unless accompanied by devotion towards the sick. Nursing is much more of a vocation than a profession. A person enters it not for what is to be got out of it, but for what he can put into it. It is not the material gain that is important, but the opportunities it provides of helping one's fellow-men.

John learned all that the hospital could teach him about the art of nursing. He learned how to make beds, clean the ward, dress wounds; but, more than all, he learned how to make contact with the human heart. He found out that illness makes children of us all. We crave for sympathy and for affection. John loved all the patients, but he did not love them solely for their own sakes. That might be dangerous, and lead the heart astray. He loved them for Christ's sake. He was filled with the consciousness of Christ's promise that what we do to our

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neighbor we do to Him. His devotion to the sick was his way of showing his love of God. The more cantankerous and ungrateful they were, the more ready he was to serve them, certain then that his devotion was inspired by the love of God and not by any natural attraction.

On May 19th, 1539, the whole city of Granada was in a state of excitement. The mortal remains of the young Empress Isabella Augusta, wife of the Emperor Charles V, were being brought from Toledo, for interment in the Royal Chapel. She would be laid beside the famous Catholic monarchs, Isabella and Ferdinand. The populace flocked into the streets to see the procession of the canons of the cathedral, the prelates, dignitaries of the court, high-ranking army officers on horseback, and endless lines of monks and priests pass by. At the head of the procession was the young Duke of Candia, Francis Borgia. He had been such a devoted attendant to the Empress that Charles V had placed her under his protection while he was away on his military campaigns.

John took his place outside the hospital doors with the other attendants to see the magnificent procession go past. Like everybody else, his eyes were attracted to the silent figure of the young duke riding in front, his face bearing the marks of sorrow. Would it be fantastic to imagine that for a moment the eyes of the two future saints met; that St. Francis Borgia recognised in St. John of God a kindred soul?

The cortege continued towards the Royal Chapel, where the coffin was laid in its place before the high altar and the lid removed. Francis Borgia looked once more

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on the Empress who had been one of the most lovely women in Spain. He staggered back dumbfounded. Was it possible for such a change to have been effected in only nineteen days? The face of the once beautiful woman was now a hideous mass of putrefaction. If this is what occurs to us after death, is it worth while bestowing so much care and attention on something which is destined to become the food of worms? If even the greatest monarchs of the earth cannot escape death and corruption, would he not do better to devote his service to the One Being Who alone is imperishable? From that moment the mind of Francis Borgia was made up. Henceforth, he would place his knighthood under the banner of the King of Kings.

John accompanied the townfolk to the church. From his humble post at the foot of a column he listened to the sermon of Fr. John of Avila, and must have been impressed by the fate of the young Empress whom death had removed from the side of the most powerful monarch then reigning on earth. Like Francis Borgia, he recognised the vanity of all worldly things. He also wished to devote himself entirely to the service of the King of Kings, but what did God want of him? The idea of his vocation had become clearer during his two years as nurse in the hospital. He had studied the work of the various religious Orders and seen that they practically covered the whole field of the Church's requirements. Yet, although there were religious Orders devoted to the care of the sick, through the general relaxation of the period, they no longer seemed to suffice for the great needs existing then.

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The rich could obtain whatever treatment they required in illness; but only a small percentage of the sick poor found their way into the hospital, where, even there, they found the care inadequate, charity cold and hygiene completely missing. For many of the ailing the street was their hospital. They were not hard to be found, for they lay under arches, trying to preserve themselves from the winter's cold with their few poor rags. Many spent their days at the church doors, exhibiting their hideous deformities in the hope of touching the hearts of the passers-by and obtaining a small alms.

It was not that there were lacking in Granada and elsewhere, institutions for the care of the sick and the poor. At all times, the Catholic Church has been mindful of her Master's injunction to practise the corporal works of mercy, and Spain in those days was a country rich in faith. A writer of that period, while he gives credit to the Church, the State and charitable persons for their generous assistance towards the needy, tells us that much of this was rendered worthless by the greed of administrators who turned to their own benefit what was intended for the relief of the poor. This sad state of affairs was to be largely remedied in the near future by the reaction of the Catholic reform, which followed closely on the so-called Protestant Reformation, and which received a powerful impetus from the Council of Trent.

John was a daily witness of the misery of the sick and the poor. Deep down in his heart the certitude was being formed that God was calling him to devote his life entirely to their relief. It was true that his work in the hospital

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gave him the opportunity of helping a considerable number, but he was only a servant there and his field of action was severely restricted. There was so much more that he could achieve if he were master in his own hospital. As he sat on his stone seat in the Royal Chapel and listened to the eloquent funeral oration of John of Avila, he turned all this over in his mind. As grace touched the heart of Francis Borgia and opened for him a new way of life in the service of God, so it also enlightened John of God and showed him the rugged pathway of his new vocation.

John was a man of quick decisions. It was part of his character to act on impulse. No sooner had he returned to the hospital than he went straight to the office of the director, and told him that he wanted to leave. Theoretically, John was still a patient there and so had no right to leave without permission. This suited the hospital authorities, because they were able to utilise his services without having to pay him. The director was naturally reluctant to lose such a valuable worker, although he could not say so openly, but he spoke rather pompously of the advantages of a longer period of convalescence. But, before John's insistence he gave way, a form was filled in to certify that John had recovered from an attack of lunacy, and he was allowed to leave the hospital a free man.

CHAPTER VII

MARY'S PILGRIM

Here was John back in the world, but the purification he had undergone in the hospital had wiped away whatever traces of worldliness there had been in him. It shows on the part of Providence a nice sense of the fitness of things in arranging that John of God, the saint of the sick, should find in a hospital the means of purifying himself from all the dross of this world. If he had not already attained to sanctity, he was well on the road to it. Not only that, but his vocation, which Almighty God had revealed to him only gradually over the years, was beginning to assume a definite shape. He knew now what God wanted of him. He was to be the apostle of the sick, the poor, the necessitous, the down-trodden of every kind—but how he was to accomplish this was still hidden from him. He saw the end without knowing the means to attain

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it. In his perplexity, he turned naturally to his Heavenly Mother. In a matter of such importance it would be fitting to consult Mary in her special shrine. No sooner did the thought occur to him than he decided to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Pilgrimages in those days were no light matter. Your true pilgrim walked, often bare-footed, and not rarely begging his food as he went along. John did all this, for he was not the man to take the easy way, even supposing him to have had the means. It was no short distance to Guadalupe—at least 300 miles, most of it over mountains and high plateaux.

He was no sooner out of the hospital than he made haste to quit Granada. It was summer time, and the country was rich with crops that promised a great harvest. As he felt the open road beneath his feet, John's heart expanded and filled with joy. A peasant by birth and upbringing, the sight of the fields of ripening corn and the blue hills in the background intoxicated him like wine. It was good to be alive! It is true he was no youngster, but a man of forty-five, and of the world's goods he had none. The well-worn clothes on his back and the stick in his hands were all his possessions, but he was happy because he was in love—in love with God and with his Holy Mother Mary. The most popular subject of the Spanish novels of the period was that of a handsome and brave knight setting out to do noble deeds of chivalry and winning the hand of a fair lady. John also was a knight, a knight of the road. And he was setting out to do deeds of chivalry on behalf of the poor and afflicted

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which would make the most daring exploits of the popular heroes of the time fade into insignificance. His fair lady was the Blessed Mother, and here he was on his way to pay homage to her.

John always believed in earning his bread. During the day, he would cut a bundle of firewood as he passed through a forest, then hoist it on to his shoulder and continue his journey. As evening came on, he would offer it to some peasant in exchange for a piece of bread, some vegetables and a shake-down in the barn. As a rule the peasants treated him kindly. The poor usually help the poor. If he could not find a shelter indoors for the night, he would lie out under a hedge. Sleeping out-of-doors was no new experience for an ex-shepherd. If there was a hospital in the place, he would go there. The hospitals of those days were also alms-houses, and wayfarers were given a night's lodging. But it was not so much the bed he sought as to be among the sick and the poor. That was the environment in which he felt himself most at home. He would help the attendants with their work for a few days and then push on.

First of all, he directed his steps towards Montilla, where he knew that he would find Fr. John of Avila, whom he had now taken as his regular director of conscience. The choice of such a competent director on John's part shows that he understood the necessity of having a sure guide on the road to sanctity. His early instruction in matters of religion had not gone beyond the catechism, but he had supplemented this by extensive reading and, as his future letters to titled persons will

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show, he had a perfect understanding of the fundamentals of the Faith. He had acquired a knowledge of the things of God at the very fountain-head of all true knowledge, that is through prayer and meditation. It was at the foot of the crucifix that John of God learned to become a saint.

After a few days in the company of Fr. John of Avila, he set out once more towards Guadalupe. His director had assured him that the vocation to which God was calling him was that of looking after the sick and the poor, and he encouraged him to go to Mary's shrine and beseech her powerful assistance in putting it into execution. On his road lay the little town of Fuente-Ovejuna. He arrived there at nightfall under a heavy downpour of rain, knocked at several doors, but none would open to give him shelter. The inhabitants were like the people of Bethlehem who refused a lodging to Mary and Joseph. John was not upset: he had often spent a night on the hills in wind and rain and he knew how to look after himself. Squatting down in the middle of the square, he rigged up a temporary shelter. He had a bundle of wood with him, and with his mountaineer's skill, soon kindled a blazing fire. The hard-hearted townsfolk, peeping out through their windows to make sure the stranger had gone, were horrified to see him coolly encamped in the middle of the square, before a comfortable fire.

This was a piece of effrontery, and no mistake—to make himself at home on their very doorsteps after they had shown him so clearly that they did not want him in the town! Rain or no rain, they would not put up with this. The impudent stranger should be taught a lesson, and

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they called out the local guardian of the law. This worthy, with a crowd at his heels, marched over to where John was encamped. What did he mean by lighting a fire in a public place and disturbing law-abiding folk? John looked at him serenely and, with a twinkle in his eye, answered that he could not do less than provide himself with a little shelter and warmth on such a bad night, as nobody in the town would do anything for him. This reply, in spite of its reasonableness, only aroused more anger. The official with a great show of authority announced that he had broken the law and must now consider himself under arrest.

So John was led off to the local jail, and next morning he was brought before a magistrate. Meanwhile, the rumour had spread that the stranger possessed powers of witchcraft, for it was argued that nobody could have lighted a fire in such a torrential downpour unless he were assisted by the devil. John must have been amused at hearing such fantastic powers ascribed to him, but his position was dangerous, for superstition was so rife that so-called witches were often put to death. However, Providence had not decreed that he should die at the stake. It reserved a slower, though no less painful, martyrdom for him, the martyrdom of charity. All the magistrate's questions could not bring out any other facts than that the prisoner was a poor pilgrim on his way to Guadalupe, so he agreed to release him, but on condition that he immediately left the town and did not return. John was accordingly led to the gates and directed on his road. The inhabitants of Fuente-Ovejuna may have had enough

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sense of humor to be ashamed of their stupidity. Anyway, they gave John two little loaves of bread and a few coins, and they parted as good friends. John was not one to harbor resentment for their inhospitable behavior.

The shrine of Our Lady towards which he was heading was famous throughout Spain. It owed its origin to a find made by a certain shepherd named Gil Corder towards the end of the thirteenth century. This man had the happiness of finding the miraculous statue of the Blessed Mother that had been sent by Pope Gregory the Great to Bishop Leander. It had been hidden at the time of the Moorish invasion and only been recovered after Spain had regained her liberty. On the spot where it had been discovered, a church was erected. Other buildings were added, a monastery and a hospice for pilgrims, and gradually a little town grew up around the sanctuary.

A more famous sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe is that in Mexico. It was only a few years before, in 1531, that Our Lady had appeared to a poor peasant who was hurrying to hear Mass in Mexico city. She had sent him with instructions to the bishop to have a church built on the spot where she stood. The bishop told him to ask a sign of the Lady. The man, sorely confused, tried to get out of the whole business by using another road, but Our Lady appeared to him again and he was forced to deliver the bishop's message and ask for a sign. He was bidden to gather roses among the rocks, where no such flowers ever grew, and to carry them in his cloak to the bishop. This he did and as he laid the flowers at the bishop's feet he was surprised to see the prelate and his attendant

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priest fall on their knees. On his poor cloak was glowing a life-size picture of the Blessed Mother, just as he had seen her, and the desired church was built to contain the miraculous image. The fame of this apparition spread quickly to Spain and greatly increased the popular devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe.

It took John a month to travel from Granada to Guadalupe. As he reached the hill overlooking the little town, he threw himself on his knees. The sanctuary of the Blessed Mother, which he had travelled so far to visit, lay there before him. At this spot, pilgrims dismounted from their horses, even though they were kings, and did the rest of the journey on foot. John had no horse, only his own legs, but his humility prompted him to approach the venerable sanctuary in the posture of a lowly suppliant, so he advanced towards it dragging himself on his knees. This form of penance is practised to this day in Spanish countries.

As a pious pilgrim, he kissed the step of the church as he entered, and then proceeded on his knees to the altar where stood the tabernacle. Devotions were being held and people were constantly entering and leaving; but John knelt there indifferent to the bustle and movement, so characteristic of churches in Latin countries. From their niches high up in the grand nave, the marble statues of saints and bishops looked down on him. They were the embodiment of generations of Spanish piety. The setting sun sent its shafts through the stained-glass windows, illuminating in brilliant hues the sculptured tombs of princes.

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John did not notice all this richness of architecture and statuary, so absorbed was he in prayer. When he had finished his devotions to the Blessed Sacrament, he went over to the Lady chapel where stood the miraculous statue. As it was late in the evening, the curtain had been drawn in front of the statue and he could not see it. This fact did not in any way reduce his fervor. He continued his prayers, reciting frequently the *Hail Holy Queen*, to which he had a special devotion. Suddenly, the curtain was drawn back, and the statue stood revealed to his gaze. Possibly, thought he, some kind person, more familiar with the church, had rendered him this little service without his being aware of their presence.

The sacristan was hovering around, and heard the sound of the curtain being pulled back. He at once hurried over to see who was daring to take such liberties in his church. When he saw a tattered-looking tramp kneeling in front of the statue, he jumped to the conclusion that the fellow was trying to take advantage of the semi-darkness to steal some of the precious votive offerings. His Spanish blood boiled up and he made a rush at the man:

"Get away out of that, you dirty scarecrow!"

Suiting the action to the word, he aimed a kick at him, but whatever happened to his rheumatic leg, it suddenly stiffened into a painful rigidity. Then the domineering bully became a whimpering coward. He took a look at John who was calmly saying his prayers with an almost ecstatic light in his eyes. This was no thief—more likely a saint. The sacristan began to tremble. What kind of

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sacrilege had he committed? Was he being punished by the loss of the use of his leg? In a very different tone of voice, he apologised to John for his outburst, begging him to forgive him and to pray that his infirmity be cured. John looked at him and said gently:

"Let us recite the *Hail Holy Queen* together."

The sacristan promptly began the prayer in a voice of unaccustomed fervor. As they neared the last words he felt a twitching in his leg and, to his great joy, the power of movement was restored. He hastened over to the sacristy as fast as he could to tell the prior about the wonderful saint he had discovered in church. The prior and some of the monks, greatly astonished, followed him and, seeing John footsore and weary, they invited him to lodge in the hostelry.

The monks among whom he found himself were called Hieronymites. Their patron saint was St. Jerome, after whom they were named, and their habit consisted of a white tunic with a brown scapular and mantle. They were formed in the fourteenth century by the amalgamation of several groups of hermits under the rule of St. Augustine, had spread rapidly in Spain, and possessed twenty-five monasteries. The Order was celebrated for generous almsgiving and for an edifying way of life. Emperor Charles V, on his abdication in 1555, withdrew into the solitude of their monastery of St. Jerome of Yuste and led a holy life there until his death.

John was delighted to find himself so hospitably received by these devout monks. He spent most of the day at prayer in the sanctuary and helped with the monastery

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chores. The prior and he had many conversations, and John spoke of his ambitions to found a hospital in Granada for the sick and the poor. The holy monk encouraged him in this, and gave him all the spiritual and material help that the monastery could afford.

Tradition has handed down to us a charming episode said to have occurred at this time. While John was praying before the miraculous statue, it suddenly came to life. The Blessed Mother held out to John the Divine Babe she carried in her arms and indicated that he should wrap Him in the swaddling clothes. It was a sign of his vocation. He was to clothe and tend Our Blessed Lord in the person of the poor. The incident may not be original, as similar visions have been ascribed to other saints, but it has always been regarded by his spiritual sons as the divine seal of approval given to his vocation. Behind the high altar in the church of the mother-house of the Order in Rome, there is a beautiful painting of this scene.

After a few weeks at Guadalupe, John felt that it was time to return to Granada for the work that awaited him there. He went to bid good-bye to the Prior and the monks who had been so kind to him. They were moved to pity by the ragged state of his clothes: it was not fitting to undertake such a long journey in such poor attire. So they brought one of their own tunics, a white woollen robe reaching to the ground, which they ordered him to wear, and not to give it away to the first beggar he met! They were intensely interested in John and his project of founding a hospital, and by giving him part of their habit may have invested him as an Hieronymite tertiary.

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The open road stretched once more before him as he set off, looking rather like a wandering hermit, with his white robe girdled at the waist, his bare head and feet, and his pilgrim's staff. If this attire were intended to secure him respect, it failed in its purpose. The youngsters still hooted and threw stones, while their elders grinned their approval. But John was used to this by now, and it suited his humility. He would have been unhappy if treated with respect, for he was convinced he was a sinner, and as such deserving of contempt. It gave him the chance of resembling his Master, Whom Herod had garbed in the white robe of a fool and mocked before his soldiers.

Being only two days' walk from Oropesa, John decided to visit the Majoral and his daughter. They had taken him in as a little runaway, and he had made his home with them for nigh on twenty years. His affections were centred on them as on a father and sister. Once again they made him welcome, but their attitude towards him was now more reserved. There could no longer be the same easy-going familiarity. He was a changed man. It was not his dress alone that gave him the appearance of a monk, everything about him breathed the odor of sanctity. Respect for him dominated all other feelings.

The little hospital in Oropesa drew him like a magnet. There he spent a good part of each day serving the sick. The simple country people grew to think that he had the power of working cures, and he was asked to visit all the invalids in the vicinity. On one of these calls he saw a poor woman bedridden with an ulcerated leg. The ulcer

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was particularly repulsive, and when the dressing was removed he was nauseated at the loathsome sight. The saints experience the same weaknesses of the flesh that we do, the difference is that *they* do not give in to them.

A moment later, John was ashamed of his weakness. A servant of the sick ought never to flinch at any sight, no matter how disgusting. He would cure himself, once and for all. Summoning all his courage and stifling the revolts of nature, he bent over and put his lips to the wound. With our present-day knowledge of microbes, we should be inclined to qualify such an action as folly and not bravery, but bacteriology was unknown in the sixteenth century. When the saints performed these acts, they did so with all the humility of servants of God seeking to overcome the natural weakness of the flesh. St. Francis of Assissi embraced a leper whose loathsome sores had aroused in him an almost overpowering impulse to run away. St. Catherine of Siena used to kiss the cancerous tumour of an ungrateful, sharp-tongued old woman whom she tended for the love of God.

John could not tarry long in Oropesa. The south was calling him. The Infant had prophesied to him "Granada shall be thy cross." The time was now ripe for him to take it upon his shoulders. He had heard that Fr. John of Avila was preaching at Baeza. Although it meant going out of his course, our indefatigable walker thought nothing of adding a few extra miles to the journey in order to receive again the instructions of his director and get his blessing for the great work he was about to start. And Fr. John was pleased to see his penitent and to hear about

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his experiences at Guadalupe. Recognising that it was now time for John to begin his work for the suffering, he specially recommended purity of intention in all that he did. Let him see in each of the sick and the poor the very person of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER VIII

SERVANT OF THE SICK

John had no set plans when he arrived in Granada. Providence had guided him so far, and he would continue to rely on God. In the meantime he must earn his daily bread, but he had no wish to go back to bookselling. Why not keep up the job that had provided him with food during the two months tramp he had just completed? There were plenty of woods on the outskirts of Granada. He could cut wood there, and bring it in to the town for sale.

The next morning, after hearing an early Mass, he went out to the woods and cut a faggot. Loading it on his shoulders he set out towards the town, but as he was passing under the Mole gate, a thought suddenly occurred to him. What would the people say when they saw him dressed in a white robe and carrying a bundle of wood

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on his shoulders? He knew his Granadians. They would surmise that he had gone crazy again, and they would try and get as much fun out of him as they could.

He laid down his bundle. His whole soul revolted at the prospect of being mocked at as a fool. Had he not had more than his share of humiliations? After all, Almighty God does not require us to go out seeking them. It is enough to accept those he sends us. And how would he ever be able to open a hospital and help the sick if he were believed to be out of his mind? A poor woman was passing by, so John handed her the bundle of firewood, and made off towards the nearest church. There, before the Blessed Sacrament, he entered into intimate conversation with his God. By degrees, however, his conscience began to upbraid him. All his fine reasonings were so many barriers he had erected to protect his self-love. He had flattered himself that he was showing prudence when in reality he was only acting the coward. How could he pretend to walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ if he shrank from a slight humiliation?

We are inclined to lose patience with the saints. With their pious exaggerations, they appear to us to make mountains out of mole hills. It is really we who are at fault because, through our lack of understanding of the things of God, we dismiss as trivialities and non-essentials those things that a more enlightened view would show us to be indispensable.

Through the light of faith, John came to have a more spiritualised vision of his future. He desired to open a hospital for the sick and serve them for the love of God.

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It had seemed to him necessary for the success of his enterprise to be of good standing in the town, for in that way he could secure the assistance of influential people. The work would proceed more easily and more surely than if he attempted to accomplish it single-handed. But this was mere human prudence. If the work was to be done for God, it must be based on God alone. God has no need of our calculating prudence to accomplish His ends; all that He requires of us is that we should be docile instruments in His hand. He Who uses the weak things of this earth to confound the strong, has no need of any man to attain His purposes. If He allows a creature to co-operate with Him in the carrying-out of good works, that man's task consists not in going ahead on his own initiative and trusting God to follow him, but rather in seeking always and on every occasion to know what is the Will of God so that he may fulfil it.

John had learned his lesson. He would no longer rely on human means, nor count on human prudence. It is through lack of the understanding of this that many good works fail. They remain only empty shells in spite of the publicity showered upon them.

The following morning he was back in the forest cutting firewood. When he had made up a large bundle, he hoisted it on to his shoulders and set off towards Granada. He did not stop until he reached the square before the cathedral. This was the favorite meeting place of all the loiterers of the town. It was also the place where John had performed most of his extraordinary penances two years before. He was well known to these men and

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could expect plenty of ribald greetings. And it was just as he expected. He put his bundle on the ground and sat on it. Soon a crowd began to gather around him.

"Hello, John, you seem to have got a new job. Are you selling wood now?"

This sally was greeted with a burst of uproarious laughter. John joined in it, too. He was not a bit upset at this attempt to get a rise out of him; but he showed them he could answer back:

"Brothers, this is the game of Birlimbane, three ships bound for the Spanish main; the more you see it, the less you understand it."

This was a reference to their favourite game. There was another shout of laughter, but this time the crowd was on John's side, and the man who had started out to taunt him began to look sheepish. Some more good-humored banter passed between the onlookers and John, and then they drifted away. He was clearly not a fool now, and there was no hope of baiting him.

This episode shows that he had a strong sense of humor and enjoyed a joke as well as the next. The remainder of his days will be marked by such prodigious labors and austerities that we might easily picture him as a gaunt, severe figure. Severe, he certainly was, but to himself only. With the sick and the poor he was as indulgent as a father. We shall see that those who were opposed to his hospital accused him of being too soft and of admitting all comers irrespective of their merits. They said that he never had the heart to send anyone away, no matter how unworthy he was.

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John must have possessed great personal charm to attract the poor and needy as he did. He had little enough to offer them from a material point of view, so there must have been some magnetism about him which drew them. While working with the sick, his face wore a gentle smile, and he was ever ready with a word of comfort. A true saint cannot be dour. We get sad and dispirited because things are not going as we would like them, but the truly holy have only one desire in life, that the Will of God should prevail in all things. And as everything that befalls us comes from the hand of God, even those things we dislike most, they who realise this truth preserve their inward peace and an unruffled exterior through all the vicissitudes of life.

While busy selling his wood during the day, John spent his nights exploring all the alleys and back-streets of the city, actually making a survey of his future clients. He came across them sleeping in old, disused warehouses, under bridges, anywhere at all where they could find some shelter from the piercing winds. What he had to give them was not much, a piece of bread, a word of comfort, but it was a new experience to find anybody taking an interest in them. They warmed to him as their protector and friend. For, so long had they received nothing but rebuffs and contempt from their fellow-men that their hearts had grown hardened and embittered. Under the magic of kindness these same hearts began to soften.

The condition of the poor in Granada was bad. After the evacuation of the city by the Moors, thousands of Spaniards had flocked there. They had heard such fab-

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ulous stories of its riches and wonders that they expected to find the streets paved with gold and precious stones. Like many another El Dorado, it failed to live up to its early promise. Among the newcomers there were adventurers who wanted to get rich quickly, but had no taste for steady work. Little by little, there formed a substratum of the population which was in desperate and dire need. Nobody seemed to be able to help them. The hospitals and institutions for the needy were both inadequate and badly managed. As the gold from the recently-discovered Americas flowed into the coffers of the nobles, it increased their arrogance and love for luxury, and widened the breach between themselves and the poor. It was the unequal distribution of wealth that was the root cause of all the misery—some had too much and others too little. John was to act as a go-between; he was to be the almoner of the rich and the reliever of the needy.

One day he was walking along a street called the Calle Lucena. Outside an empty house there was a sign—"House to let for lodging the poor." It was an unusual way of advertising a place, and puzzled him. Who would want to rent his house for that purpose? Whoever he was, he must be a charitable man.

John stood rooted to the ground before that empty house until the people in the street winked knowingly at one another to indicate that although a bit cracked he was harmless. To him it represented the culmination of a lifetime of searching. He was now forty-five. As long as he could remember, right back into childhood, he had been led onward by the mysterious star of his vocation.

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It had led him through strange adventures, and he had had to follow it blindly, not knowing where it was taking him.

Now, like the wonderful star that led the three Wise Men from the East, it stopped over a house. Within was Jesus. Not lying in the arms of Mary and attended by Joseph as the Wise Men had found Him, but in the person of the sick and the infirm that this house would shelter. It was John's Epiphany. He had reached the term of the long quest of his vocation. The simple little card in the window, with its message of a house to let for the poor, was God's answer to a lifetime of prayer and searching.

John was not the person to let the grass grow under his feet when he heard the call of God. Within an hour he had completed the arrangements for renting the house. The landlord only asked for a nominal rent, for he was one of those who had seen through John's apparent craziness, and recognised the saint underneath. He knew also of his love for the poor and his burning desire to help them. It would not be too much straining of the imagination to suspect that the whole thing was a delicate way of providing John with the premises he required, without subjecting him to any indebtedness. Nobody hands a house over to ne'er-do-wells, unless they are looking for a quick way to demolish it. John's credit as a hardworking woodcutter was a sufficient guarantee for this Christian landlord.

The house acquired, there arose the question of furnishing it. John had no money, so would have to beg. He had

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foreseen that his charitable work would entail a lot of begging, and that is why he had been so eager to gain the virtue of humility. He had accustomed himself to accept humiliations, and had even sought them out, because he knew he would need such spiritual strength in the future. He could not count on any regular aid from State or Church, and would have to support his work by questing in the streets. With his reputation for eccentricity, he foresaw how many taunts, mockeries and insults he would draw upon himself.

A kind soul, in the person of a priest attached to the Royal Chapel, gave him a sum of money which amounted to about fifteen dollars in our currency, but it was probably considered a large sum then. John laid it out wisely and was able to buy forty-six cots, with mattresses and blankets. This material could hardly have been new: he was probably able to get hold of some second-hand goods. There was no chromium finish about the equipment of this hospital. Everything was of the plainest and poorest, but it was clean.

All he wanted now to complete his hospital were patients, and he knew where to find them. His knowledge of the underworld of Granada was by this time pretty thorough. At night, he made a tour of their haunts. To the sickliest and most infirm he offered a bed in his hospital. It is hardly likely that they jumped at his offer. Human nature can adapt itself to almost any conditions, and the poor often have a strong attachment to their slum surroundings and their paltry possessions. But, first one and then another accepted his hospitality. When these

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found that John respected their liberty and independence and that the regulations were few and reasonable, they liked the place; and they found means of passing on the news to their cronies.

As many of John's clients were unable to walk, the problem of providing for their transportation to hospital soon arose. He could not ring up the nearest fire station and ask for an ambulance; it would be a few hundred years before such modern conveniences would appear.

There was not even a handcart. He solved the problem in his own original way, by lifting the patient on to his shoulders and carrying him to hospital. It required a strong man to do this, but John's way of living had strengthened his muscles, and toughened his powers of endurance.

All his other difficulties were insignificant, however, compared to that of providing for the upkeep of the hospital. He had no income of any kind, and it was no use bringing the sick together unless he could feed them. Food he must have and at once. Nowadays, he would have got a committee together and placed the burden of finding money on their shoulders. There would be Press campaigns to gain public interest and support. Although not disdaining the help of others, John was quite capable of handling the situation alone, and so became his own publicity director. With a basket on his shoulders and a pot in each hand, he went the rounds of all the back alleys. He chose the poorer quarters of the city, knowing from experience that the working classes are often more open-handed than the well-to-do. With a perfect sense of

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timing, he went at an hour when the family would be gathered together for a meal. It was not their few coins he wanted, but food, old clothing, bits of furniture: he could make use of anything they could spare to him.

Going round from door to door would be a slow process, so he hit upon a novel way of making known his wants. All day long the streets had resounded with the cries of itinerant pedlars. Now, in the evenings, they were quiet. So John took up where the pedlars left off. He also would advertise his wares. What he had to offer to the people of Granada was a means of doing good to the poor and afflicted. He was a vendor of acts of charity, providing them with a means of practising the most sublime of all the virtues, divine charity. It was a wonderful opportunity for them to do good to their souls at a trivial cost.

He told them so, by raising his voice in the streets. Like the note of a bell, it rang out clearly on the night air: "Who wants to do good to himself? Do good to yourselves! For the love of God, Brothers, do good!" John possessed a good deal of the simplicity and ruggedness of the mountains among which he had been reared, and he spoke out what he thought. It seemed to him that in asking people to contribute towards the maintenance of the sick, he was giving them a heaven-sent opportunity of doing something worthwhile for their souls. There was nothing cringing about his begging; it was he who was bestowing favors, not they!

The people hastened to their windows and doors on hearing this unusual cry, and they recognised John. Was

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he still acting the madman? But his hospital was a testimony to his genuineness. Little by little they began to fill his basket and pots. A few scraps from their tables, a piece of cast-off clothing, sometimes a small sum of money. John received it all with a gracious smile and a pleasant "God reward you!" The widow's mite was as welcome as the most abundant alms. He knew that it is not the size of the gift, but the motive in giving it that makes it of value in God's eyes. So he was offering to these people a chance of showing their love of God by helping Him in the person of the sick.

This manner of supplying the needs of their patients was continued by his disciples when John had gone to his heavenly reward. When the Brothers were given a hospital in Rome by the Holy Father, they used to go through the streets of an evening, crying: "Do good to yourselves, Brothers! For the love of God, do good." This cry became so familiar, that the common folk nicknamed them through affection, "Do good Brothers." "Fate-bene-Fratelli." The name has stuck to them for 400 years, and to this day in Italy the Brothers are known as the Fate-bene-Fratelli.

During the process of beatification, one of the witnesses, named Alphonsus della Pena, remembered as a child seeing John on his questing round. This is the description he gave of him: "He was bare-footed and bare-headed both in summer and in winter. His clothing consisted of a kind of blouse of black cloth and a pair of trousers of rough cloth which were too short to reach the ankles. A basket was strapped to his shoulders, and he carried a

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pot in his hand. As night was falling, he used to go through the streets of Granada crying: 'Who wants to do good to himself, brothers?' If by chance, while he was questing in this way, he came across a poor sick man on the road, and there were many such because of the scarcity of hospitals, he would carry him on his shoulders to his own hospital and there look after him." The same witness adds a more homely touch to this evidence: "John was passing one day close by the square where they sell fried cakes, when he saw an old man on the ground, unable to move. Without any hesitation he lifted him up on to his shoulders and carried him to his hospital."

In passing we note that John's attire was no longer the white habit. Doubtless it was by then clothing some unfortunate beggar, while John was wearing the latter's rags.

CHAPTER IX

HIS FIRST HOSPITAL

As soon as John got a patient into his hospital, the first care was to wash the sick man's feet. This act had both a hygienic and a religious significance. In countries where it is common for people to go barefooted, the feet easily gather dust, and it is therefore a real act of charity to provide means of washing them. The Old Testament is full of such acts of hospitality. When three visitors came to Abraham at the door of his tent, his greeting to them was: "I will fetch a little water and wash ye your feet". (*Gen. xviii*). With the Jews this ceremony came in time to be a religious rite. But it was Our Blessed Lord in washing the feet of His disciples at the Last Supper, Who brought out its full spiritual meaning. The Church has embodied it in the liturgy. On Holy Thursday, there

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takes place the ceremony of Mandatum or washing of the feet. The Bishop or another dignitary washes the feet of twelve poor men in remembrance of Our Lord's act.

The washing of the feet was also a form of humility very pleasing to God. Jesus had said to His disciples: "If I, being your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, how much the more ought you to wash one another's feet" (*John* xiii). It was typical of John that his first act on receiving a patient was one of deference and humility towards him. He placed himself in the position of a servant to him. It was Jesus Christ Whom he was welcoming to his hospital in the person of the sick man, therefore he could not pay him too great an honor.

The poor man who was the recipient of this kind attention, benefited from it in several ways. John had a way of letting all newcomers understand that the washing of the body had very little benefit were it not accompanied by a similar cleansing of the soul. This was a gentle reminder to them to go to confession. In fact, he was continually telling his patients that the peace of a good conscience is a necessary condition for regaining health of body. Modern scientific discoveries bear him out in this, as it has been found that many bodily organs function badly when the mind is not at rest.

Most of John's patients came to him soiled with the mud of the streets. They had lived in degrading poverty, depending on the compassion of others for a meager crust. While they were lying at church doors, exposed to the vagaries of the weather, they had watched the rich go by in all their pomp and finery. How often their plea

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for a tiny alms had been rejected with a look of supercilious disdain. These nobles would spend lavish sums to satisfy a mere whim, but they refused to give to the poor a modest coin that they would never miss. Is it any wonder that these beggars had become embittered, that the continual neglect by their fellow-men had caused them to sink to the level of animals?

Having their feet washed by John was quite a new experience. Nobody had ever bothered about them before, rather had they always been spurned and pushed aside as if they were of no account. In fact, they had almost come to believe that they were inferior to others by nature, but now their benefactor was treating them as if they were persons of some consequence! Little by little under the spell of his kindness they regained their self-esteem. He was not tossing them a crust of mere pity. He was treating them as if he felt it were an honor to be allowed to do so, which indeed he did.

After cleansing them, he dressed their wounds, many of them having sores of long standing. In the dirt and squalor in which they lived, it was almost impossible for these sores to heal, and most cases had become so chronic as to be impervious to any treatment. Many beggars, in fact, did not want their wounds to heal. They were their principal stock-in-trade. Wrapped around with filthy rags, they exposed them to the gaze of passers-by, and it was a nauseating sight. Whether people gave through pity or disgust, however, it produced returns, and even to-day in some Latin countries beggars still keep up the practice.

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As John bent over their wounds, he thought of the parable of the Good Samaritan. He knew that this was a figure of Our Lord Who had come on earth to lift up fallen man and to pour into the wounds of his soul the healing balm of love and pardon. At the same time, Our Lord intended it to be a lesson to us all that we are to practise charity towards our neighbour. We are not to take the term *neighbor* in any restricted sense, but to apply it to all mankind, irrespective of race, color or religion. John had a strong sense of the brotherhood of man. Whether he spoke to the highest or the lowest in the land, he always addressed him as *brother*. His whole life was a living act of faith in the doctrine of the Mystical Body. Christ is the Head, and all men form its members. We are all brothers in Christ, and should treat one another with the kindness and consideration that such a relationship demands. It is the forgetfulness of this brotherhood that is at the root of all the evils that afflict our society. Wars, social injustice, class hatred, racial discrimination, all would vanish as snow before the warm rays of the sun, if only men would heed the teachings of Christ on charity. John of God was the living personification of the charity of God. It is such men who work miracles of conversion. Were not the pagan Romans touched at the sight of the charity of the early Christians, to the point of exclaiming: "See how they love one another!"

John was an innovator in hospital administration—he gave each patient his own bed. There does not seem anything wonderful to us about that, in fact, we should be horror-struck if it were otherwise; but it was a definite

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advance on the spirit of the times. Medical science of those days practised very little segregation. Patients suffering from contagious diseases, skin affections, digestive disorders, tuberculosis, were often mixed indiscriminately together in the same ward. What is even more shocking to our modern ears is to learn that several patients were often obliged to sleep in the same bed. Those who have seen the film, *Monsieur Vincent*, must have shuddered with revulsion at the view of the hospital wards in the time of St. Vincent de Paul; and this was almost a hundred years after John had opened his hospital in Granada.

From the accounts of the early historians of his life, we can roughly piece together how he spent the day in his hospital. He rose at dawn, assisted at Mass in a neighboring church, then hurried back home to wake up the patients. We have remarked how, in spite of his austerities and exceedingly laborious life, he was of a cheerful, even humorous nature. Entering the ward, he clapped his hands to attract attention, and said: "Come along, brothers, let us thank God, for this is how the little birds begin their day." This is a greeting that would have delighted St. Francis of Assisi, with its poetic reference to the morning songs of the birds. John was not talking about something that he had read in books. After a lonely night beside his sheep on the mountain, he had often thrilled with joy as the first rays of the sun lit up the sky and the birds burst into song as if in praise of their Creator.

He next began the sweeping, dusting and general tidying. The early historians have made frequent references

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to the trouble he had to take in providing water for the hospital. It all had to be drawn from a nearby well, and this meant frequent journeys to and fro with a bucket. A large quantity was consumed, as it was plentifully used for the personal cleanliness of the patients and for the washing of floors. This preoccupation with cleanliness was not common to the times. Medical science had no notion of bacteria nor the spreading of disease germs by dirt; consequently, no particular attention was paid to the maintenance of hygienic conditions. In those hospitals where the administration was slovenly and the staff careless, the standard of cleanliness often sank to a deplorable level.

In spite of his superhuman activity, however, John could never have attended to the needs of forty-five patients without some assistance. He had no regular helpers in the early days, that much is certain. The reputation of madness still clung to him, and nobody cared to be associated with the work. But his patients helped him, so far as their infirmities would allow. A one-armed man would bring water from the well. Another who could hobble around would help with the sweeping. A third, with a sense of neatness, would give a hand with the beds. It was a happy family, where each one helped according to his capacity. John was the father and presiding genius. He was constantly on the spot, moving around from bed to bed, attending to each one's needs. He would help this one to take his food, say a word of consolation here, straighten a pillow there. Many a time he must have had to put a stop to quarrels, and to altercations, for his pa-

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tients were not angels. They were rough mendicants who had been used to squabbling, even to striking each other with their crutches; but John's patience and good humor were able for it all.

When the bulk of the work was done, he went out to gather wood. This was another requirement of the hospital that entailed considerable fatigue. The woods were situated at some distance from the town, and it meant a long journey on foot both ways. When the river was in flood, quantities of driftwood were brought down. It was easier to collect this, but it was dangerous. As we shall see, John narrowly escaped with his life on one of these expeditions. But he had to have fuel for cooking the food, and in winter for heating the hospital. A cold wind blew down from the snow-peaked Sierra Nevadas, and without warmth many of his patients would have died. The Spaniards themselves describe their climate as three months of broiling summer and nine months of icy winter.

The provision of food, the supreme duty of a hospital administrator, was met by begging. As soon as evening came, John took his basket and pots and set out on his rounds. His cry: "Do good to yourselves, brothers!" would soon be heard in the back streets. At first, the response was poor. People looked upon it as another pious exaggeration and were not interested. But gradually they were forced to see that he was doing good and, in fact, fulfilling a public service that had been too long neglected. So they filled his basket and pots with scraps of food; and he was grateful for all they gave him.

When he got back to the hospital, supper was made

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ready. It would be soup, bread and, perhaps, a few vegetables. If there were any little tit-bits in the basket, he would distribute them to the most needy. Then the rest of the food he had brought in would be put away for the next meal. Many of his patients were unable to eat alone because of deformities or weakness, and these he would feed himself, with the gentleness of a mother towards her child. It was Jesus he was feeding. That was enough for him to put into his task all the love of a heart overflowing with affection for his Master.

How and where he took his own food, we are not told, but we may be certain that the little he took came from the common pot. From the first, he had identified himself with his sick. He was one of them, with this difference, however, that he was their servant and they were his masters. We can picture him swallowing a few mouthfuls of soup while standing. Then he would pass on to the next job. His meal over. He could not spare the time to sit down to it.

His bed was a cot in one of the corners of the ward. This was his official bed, but he was hardly ever in it, as it was nearly always occupied by a patient. He would never hesitate to admit a suppliant so long as his own bed was available. As a shepherd, he had grown accustomed to sleeping on the hard ground, so he would stretch out in some corner with a blanket around him and a block under his head for a pillow. When the room became really full, even this comfort was denied him. He then retreated under the stairs where there was a cripple's carriage, and curled up in that.

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John of God seems to have had an extraordinary capacity for being able to do without sleep. He slept an hour a night, and said that was sufficient for him. It was the same with his food. He appears to have been able to exist on a few scraps. As regards his clothes, he was never dressed the same for two days in succession. If he saw a beggar more tattered than himself, he would change rags with him. It is not surprising that in time the common people came to look upon his life as one continual miracle. They argued that without supernatural help nobody could work as hard as he did and take so little food and sleep. Certainly, Almighty God upheld him, but it is a tribute to his iron constitution and wonderful powers of endurance that he was able to lead this kind of life for ten years.

We are told that, last thing at night when all his patients were in bed and asleep and everything had been got ready for the following day, he would sit down and mend their clothes or repair a torn blanket. It is a touching picture of John sitting beside his little lamp, like the mother of a family, with a needle and thread in his rough hands, mending some threadbare garment. He was truly both father and mother to the big family he had gathered around him. None of their needs escaped his loving eye, he would do his best to supply them, no matter at what cost to himself.

When all this work was over, he was not yet ready for bed. He was so busy during the day, that he had little time for deep meditation and vocal prayer. It is true that he did not forget Almighty God, for he had arrived at

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a pitch of sanctity where recollection was almost continual. Absorbed as he was by so many duties during the day, he still remained in constant union with his divine Master. His secret was to keep renewing his good intention. As a mariner is not satisfied with setting the course of his ship once, but keeps a constant watch upon it and frequently checks with the compass, so John lifted his heart to God at the beginning of each action and offered it for His greater honor and glory. In this way he advanced in grace and merit at every moment of the day, and all the difficulties, disappointments and obstacles he met with, instead of discouraging him, were regarded as so many opportunities of proving his love for God by a ready acceptance of His holy will.

We are not privileged to enter into the intimate secret of his midnight devotions and prayers to his divine Master, but we can guess that they touched first of all upon his sins. John was ever conscious that he was a sinner. Whatever the gravity of his sins, he would never let himself forget them, and truly believed himself the vilest of men. Moreover, he wanted others to believe it also, and to treat him accordingly. All the public penances that he had performed had been inspired by this idea of drawing down upon himself the contempt of his fellow-men, which he felt would be a just retribution for his sins. It is the humility of the saints, which it is hard for us, common mortals, to appreciate and comprehend.

Although the demands of his vocation forced him to lead the active life—and an extraordinarily active one at that—he was by nature and taste a contemplative like his

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contemporaries, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. He also could rise to the dazzling heights of Divine Love, and his heart might well have been pierced by the seraph's burning arrow. But his love of God found its expression not so much in flights of ecstasy as in acts of heroic devotion to his neighbour. He had made his very own those words of Our Divine Lord: "Whatever you do to even the least of My Brethren you do unto Me."

His life during the next ten years will be one continuous—we might almost say bewildering—round of charitable activities. He will devote himself to the alleviation of every form of misery that human flesh is heir to, until he ends his life, worn out in the cause of his brothers in Christ, the sick and the afflicted. Running through it all like a golden thread is the love of God. He is no mere philanthropist. He yields second place to none in his love of mankind, but it is a love based on the love of God. It is the putting into practice of the great command of Jesus: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart . . . and thy neighbour as thyself for the love of God." No wonder St. Paul, speaking of the virtues, should cry out: "and the greatest of these is charity."

CHAPTER X

DIVINE APPROVAL

John's hospital was for the needy poor; and it was maintained by them also, when possible. They deprived themselves even of necessities in order to have something to give to those who were still more unfortunate than themselves. The following charming little incident well illustrates this fact. It could be entitled "the widow's mite." A poor widow named Jane de Fusteros was in the habit of giving a small amount of food to John every day when he passed along the street where she lived. One day all that she could offer him was a handful of salt. She felt ashamed at the smallness of her gift, but John thanked her so kindly that it took the sting out of her poverty.

This good lady had an only son who was soldiering in Italy. His regiment had been disbanded, and he was making his way home to Spain on foot. As he had no money,

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he was obliged to beg for food as he went along. By good fortune he was signed on as one of the crew on a ship leaving Genoa, and so landed in Spain much earlier than he had expected. On his return home, he told his mother about his adventures and the difficulties he had in reaching the coast. He had plenty of time to go into details, and she with a mother's love wanted to hear of everything that had befallen him. Every day, he said, some charitable person had given him a little food; but one day he had been really hungry, for the district he was passing through was so poor that the people had been able to spare him nothing more than a handful of salt.

His mother's curiosity was aroused at this coincidence, for she remembered her shame when that was all she was able to offer to John. She made her son retell the whole story, and describe exactly what he had been given in the way of alms. We can imagine her astonishment when she realised that her son had received every day the exact amount of food, even to the handful of salt, that she had given to John. This story spread like wildfire, and the simple folk, who saw in it much more of a miracle than a coincidence, began to look upon John in a different light.

John's life so far had been spent in obscurity. He had been a nobody. It is true that his public penance had brought him notoriety, but it was of a kind that led people to despise him as a man off his head. He was quite happy to be regarded as a fool, desiring humiliations so that he might expiate his sins, but God would not allow His

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servant to remain under a cloud for ever. The work he was doing was destined to expand, and to accomplish this he would need the support of the wealthy and the powerful. As long as he was branded as queer, these people would not help him. But God is mighty in His ways. He set the seal of His divine approval on John's work in such a striking and unmistakable manner that even the most sceptical could no longer doubt.

The self-appointed guardian of the poor was returning home from a begging expedition one night. It was a dark night, with the wind driving the icy rain against all that stood in its path. As he passed alongside of a church, a cripple, who was lying huddled up against the wall, in a vain attempt to shelter from the storm, held out his arms imploringly for assistance. John's tender heart could not resist such a pathetic appeal, so he knelt down beside the cripple to lift him on his shoulders. He managed to get the unfortunate man into position, but as he was moving off he slipped on the wet pavement and fell to the ground, with the cripple on top of him.

It was a deserted part of the town, and such a wild night that there was not likely to be anybody about to help him with his burden. Suddenly a young gentleman appeared as if from nowhere, and with strong arms helped John to regain his feet. He then lifted up the cripple and settled him back on John's shoulders. The latter was overwhelmed at this unexpected kindness on the part of one who was evidently a noble. So far, the upper classes had just ignored him.

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"Brother," he murmured apologetically, "forgive my clumsiness. I have to contend with an ass that is well fed and well clothed and too lazy to work."

The young man smiled at John's description of his body and turned as if to go. John wished to know whom it was who had helped him, and said courteously:

"Brother, at least give me your name that I may remember your kind deed in my prayers."

By this time a few people had gathered round to see what was happening. The young man gave him a sweet smile and replied: "John, I am the Archangel St. Raphael. God has entrusted to me the mission of watching over you and all those who assist you in serving the poor."

The next instant he had vanished.

Murillo, the great Spanish artist, painted a wonderful picture of this scene. About 1650, just a hundred years after the saint's death, he was engaged in decorating the walls of the church attached to the Hospital of Charity in Seville. He was at the height of his fame and, being a member of the Confraternity of Charity whose members engaged in good works in the hospital, his piety prompted him to paint appropriate scenes on the walls of their chapel. Nothing was more natural for him than to depict St. John of God, the great Spanish hero of charity, receiving this favour of the apparition of St. Raphael the Archangel. It was a tale known to all and would stimulate the zeal of all who beheld it by reminding them how wonderfully God seconds the charity we do to others.

Another incident from the life of St. John of God was also painted by Murillo, for the hospital chapel. He

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named it "The Multiplication of Bread." It depicts a further apparition of St. Raphael to our Saint, and illustrates the difficulties John had to face in those early days when trying to feed his patients, and the miraculous manner in which Providence came to his assistance.

One day John returned home to his hospital with an empty basket. It may have been that there was a shortage of work in the town and, in consequence, the people had little food for themselves. Whatever the reason, there was nothing for dinner. John was disconsolate. If only he had bread he could always make up a soup out of some odds and ends of vegetables, but where, in this time of scarcity, was he to get bread? Who could give it to him?

At that moment the door opened, and a young man, clad in a similar fashion to John, walked into the room. In his arms he carried a big basket of delicious-looking bread. He walked over to the table and deposited his load. The patients gazed in silent stupefaction. Who could be the wonderful benefactor who was sending them such lovely bread? As for John, he stood rooted to the ground. Not a word escaped his lips, for he had recognised the bearer of the bread. It was the same young man who had helped him in the street—none other than the Archangel St. Raphael.

It was no wonder John stood mute. What could he say in the presence of such an august visitor? Should he not throw himself on his knees and say in the words of the centurion of the Gospel: "I am not worthy that thou shouldst enter under my roof." Why should God send an Archangel to visit such a lowly creature as himself? His

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sins rendered him unworthy of such a celestial apparition. But it was really not for him that the Archangel had come, it was for the sake of the sick. They were in need of food, and Providence had supplied it. How God must love the suffering when He sends an angel to minister to their wants! St. Raphael, one of the seven mighty Spirits who stand continually before the throne of God, is often called the physician of God, because he was sent to cure the blindness of Tobias, as recounted in the Old Testament.

The silence was becoming embarrassing, and it was the Archangel himself who broke it. With his heavenly smile he turned to John: "My brother, take this bread which heaven sends you. We form one and the same order. For there are men who under a poor garment are equal to the angels."

It was magnificent praise from the mouth of an Archangel. Yet John was not likely to become proud on that account, for he knew his own weakness too well. He had been a sinner before and he could fall again. If he did not do so, it was because the loving hand of God was supporting him. St. Philip Neri in later times used to warn God to be on His guard against him. Our Saint was animated with the same sentiments and might have made his own this prayer: "Lord, beware of John, or he will betray You."

But an even greater favor was to be granted him. One evening as he was returning home after begging for food, he came across a sick man lying in the street. As was his custom, he lifted him up on to his shoulders and

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carried him to the hospital. While a bed was being prepared for the new patient, John sat him on a chair in the middle of the ward and went to look for a basin to wash his feet. As he was gently bathing one of the soiled, sore feet, and bending over to imprint a kiss on it in memory of Our Lord's act before the Last Supper, there appeared on the flesh a gaping wound. John drew back in fear. A heavenly light had been vouchsafed to him and he understood, yet—he dare not look up. Like the apostles on Mount Thabor he wanted to hide his face, but a soft, gentle voice was speaking to him: "John, My faithful servant, be not afraid. I have come to testify My gratitude for the care you take of My sick and poor."

It was Our Blessed Lord Himself, bearing the marks of His Precious Wounds.

In an instant He was gone, but the room was aglow with a brilliant light. The patients who had understood nothing of what had just taken place before their eyes, panicked, screaming: "Fire! Fire!" John calmed them and bade them be quiet. "This fire will not injure you. Rather will it inflame your hearts. For Jesus Christ has come among you as a sick man, as one of yourselves."

We cannot attempt to explain the ways of God with His saints. These heavenly apparitions and visitations do not seem to have been sent to John for his own sake. If the miracles which God performs on behalf of the saints are closely examined, they will be seen to be much more for the benefit of others than for the saints themselves. Those chosen souls do not require miracles; it is we who need them because our faith is so weak. Our Lord could

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say to us, as He did to the stiff-necked Jews of His day: "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe."

In spite of his devotion to the sick and the poor, there was still a great deal of prejudice against John among the people of Granada. They could never forget that he had been a madman, or at least what they considered one. Some of the opposition was probably motivated by the fact that they knew he was doing a job which they should have done long ago. The condition of the needy and afflicted in the city was deplorable. Everybody knew of it, but nobody did anything about it until John came along and tackled the problem single-handed. The administrators of the two hospitals in Granada were drawing fat salaries and allowing the patients under their care to be neglected. There were minor officials also who were reaping their share of misdirected funds. Naturally such persons did not like being put to shame by an impoverished stranger without learning or worldly influence.

It was certainly not John who spread the news that Our Blessed Lord had deigned to appear to him in his hospital. He would be the very last one to make it known. But the patients knew about it and, with that love of miracles which is so noticeable a feature of the piety of Latin countries, they made it their business to broadcast the tidings right and left. Of course, many people affected not to believe in it—"the hallucinations of a madman" was their verdict. The common people whose instincts are at times truer, because they are not so hedged in with preconceived likes and dislikes, did believe in him and still regarded him as their provider and protector in all

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their wants. There was a great deal of misery in Granada, both material and spiritual—unemployment, poverty, vice. Side by side with all these social evils were wealth, arrogance, luxury, and withal miserly reluctance when it came to helping the poor. The special mission which Providence had confided to John was the bridging of the gap between rich and poor. It was a work which would wear him out in a few years, because the labor entailed was almost beyond the wit of man. It was a work, too, which only a saint could undertake. In spite of all the failings of the times, that was an age of faith. Although there were many lapses, there was a respect among all classes for the Church and for her genuine servants. John was to become the champion of the poor, and to be recognised as such by the highest and the lowest in the land.

CHAPTER XI

HIS FIRST FOLLOWERS

His first helpers were men who were matured, as John had been, by experience. They were not pious young men who embarked on God's service after an unblemished youth. Rather were they hardened men of the world, whose lives had been anything but edifying. The first was Anthony Martin. This man had come to Granada on an unusual errand, none other than to secure a death sentence against a certain Peter Velasco, who had killed his brother. The tragedy had taken place during a quarrel, and it was difficult to say who had been responsible. In accordance with the traditions of the time, Martin had sworn vengeance. He declared that he would never give up the vendetta until he saw Velasco swinging from a gibbet.

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Velasco was in prison awaiting sentence, for in those days the law pursued its course ponderously and slowly. Martin, who was the principal witness for the prosecution, had to remain in Granada. In order to be able to satisfy his taste for luxury and soft living, he engaged in that most iniquitous of trades, which to-day we label the white slave traffic. The whole town was scandalised by his conduct and by his cold, unswerving hatred of Velasco. Many attempts had been made to get him to change his ways, but none was of any avail. It is said that no man is so bad that he has not at least one redeeming trait, and for all his vileness, Martin was generous to the poor. Whenever he saw John, he would pour a handful of money into his basket. One day as they met in the street, John suddenly threw himself on his knees in front of Martin, at the same time drawing out the crucifix he always carried with him, and held it up: "Brother, although God is infinitely merciful, He will never forgive us unless we forgive our neighbour. If Velasco has shed your brother's blood, you, by your sins, have shed the blood of God. Pay heed to the blood of God which cries for pity rather than the blood of your brother which seeks vengeance."

Marvellous effect of the words of a saint! Martin's stony heart was touched. Lifting John to his feet, he embraced him. "Brother John, I will do for you what I have so long refused to the entreaties of others. Let us go to the prison together, and I will have Velasco released right away."

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The law of the period allowed a case to be dropped at the instance of the prosecution. Martin completed the legal formalities, and he and John went in to break the good news to Velasco. That same evening, the two one-time enemies turned up at the hospital together. They had been talking things over, and had decided to expiate the infamy of their past lives by dedicating themselves wholly to God's service. They now begged humbly to be permitted to join John in his work for the sick; they owed so much to him that they could desire no better way of serving God.

Although John of God is the founder of a religious order which perpetuates his work for the sick and the poor, he does not seem to have started off with any fixed idea of bringing together such a body of men. It came into being more by chance and through the increasing demands of the work, than as the result of any definite plan. John began his work for the sick with the sole aim of helping a few of those whom he saw to be in dire want. The work grew through its own vitality. As it developed, he could no longer run it single-handed, and he was glad to accept the assistance of those who offered themselves. Anthony Martin and Peter Velasco thus became his first two helpers and, though they were far from realising it at the time, the first two members of the order which bears his name. Both of them proved to be worthy of John's trust. They were animated by the same spirit of charity as their master, and thenceforth led exemplary and holy lives. Brother Anthony took John's place as head

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of the hospital after the latter's death, although he only survived him by three years. He died at Madrid where he was engaged in opening a hospital similar to that of Granada. Velasco took the name of Peter the Sinner. He survived John by seventeen years, and rendered great service to the order in its early days.

The third postulant, if we may so call him, was another strange character. Previous to his conversion, he hated John. He was one of those most despicable of all men, a peeping Tom; and he was convinced that if he spied on John long enough he would discover something unworthy in his conduct, which he could make public. One evening John had occasion to call on a widow who lived on the second floor of a tenement house. The death of her husband had left her in very straitened circumstances, and there were days when she had barely any food. John had heard about her case, and used to leave some food at her house in a discreet manner so as not to embarrass her.

One evening he was climbing the stairs on his usual errand of charity. This man, whose name was Simon of Avila, saw him enter the house, and stealthily followed him. While John was in the room, he put his eye to the key-hole, but instead of seeing what his wicked mind expected, even he was impressed by what he witnessed. As he told the story afterwards, he said he saw as it were, his own soul disfigured with sin and the sword of God's justice ready to descend upon him. Simon got such a shock that he recoiled backwards, and before he had time

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to pull himself together, tripped up and went hurtling down the stairs.

The noise he made was terrific, and John came rushing out of the room to see what had happened. Hearing groans, he looked over the bannister and saw Simon lying doubled up at the foot of the stairs. Rushing down, he found him unconscious, so knelt beside him, made the Sign of the Cross on his chest and prayed to God to spare his life. Slowly, Simon opened his eyes. When he had recovered his wits and recognised his benefactor, he was covered with confusion, and asked if he might accompany him to the hospital. There he fell on his knees, confessing his ignominious behaviour, and beseeching John to admit him among his followers, that he might amend his life and do penance for his sins. John considered the matter for some time; then, satisfied that Simon had sincere intentions, he accepted him. Simon lived up to his early promise, became an excellent subject, and rendered great service to the hospital until his death in 1584, thirty-four years after that of its founder.

It must not be thought that John accepted without question all those who thus presented themselves. He studied them carefully beforehand, knowing from experience that the work of tending the sick is trying to human nature, and that not all who think themselves called to that life have the requisite qualities. It is quite possible, too, that as his work was becoming more popular and the alms more abundant, a few shady characters might have thought to fill their own pockets by getting

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under his wing. By way of illustration, take the following case. A man came to the hospital one day and asked to be admitted among John's helpers. After some conversation, he was very delicately refused, as he was not suitable. The fellow took it badly. He started shouting insults and, working himself up into a passion, drew a stone from his pocket and threw it at John, striking him on the face. John was strong enough to have given the miscreant the thrashing he deserved, but instead, he met the assault very quietly and, when his helpers wanted to take the matter into their own hands, he ordered them to leave him alone.

"It's my fault; I probably angered him by my refusal, and the poor fellow lost his self-control."

A letter has been preserved which John sent to a young man who had expressed a desire to work in the hospital. It is full of sound advice and could, with profit, be sent to a present-day aspirant to the religious life:

"My dear son," he wrote, "have constantly before your eyes Our Lord Jesus Christ and His Holy Passion. Remember how He always returned good for evil. You must act in this way when you will be in the House of God. If you intend to come, do so immediately. Once here, you will have no further dealings with womenfolk. You will be obliged to labour and to obey for God's sake much more than you have done in the past. You will have to be especially zealous in the service of the poor.

"If you come, be prepared to sacrifice all for the sake of God. Be determined to do good works, if

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necessary at the cost of your skin. Remember how St. Bartholomew, having had his skin torn off, carried it away on his shoulders. I warn you that your time will not be spent in idle walks, but you will have to work, for the hardest work is reserved for the favourite child. Have God continually before your eyes, and never miss hearing Mass every day. Receive often the Sacrament of Penance, and never have the misfortune of retiring to sleep with a mortal sin on your soul. Love Our Lord Jesus Christ above all things. The more you love Him the more He will love you."

The sound commonsense of this letter shows that John was no hot-headed religious zealot. He had measured carefully the task that he had undertaken and had no illusions about the qualities that were required. These same qualities he would expect from those who wished to co-operate with him. He knew that sentimental outbursts of fervor do not advance a person far in the religious life. What is needed is a cool head and a readiness to refuse no sacrifice that God may ask.

It is true that John did not intend to band his followers together as a religious community. His humility would never have allowed him to undertake such a delicate task, and he remained a layman all his life. It was some years after he died that the little community of men he had gathered together, received recognition from the Holy See as a religious congregation. But, if not a religious in the official sense of the word, he was certainly one at heart. Although he had not taken the strict religious

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vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, he certainly lived according to their spirit. He observed poverty to the point of destitution, never having anything he could call his own, because everything that was given to him he passed on to others. His chastity was precious to him. So thoroughly had he mortified his body and controlled concupiscence, that Providence would, in time, confide to him the delicate and dangerous task of rescuing fallen women. Before he began his work for the sick, he had pledged obedience to Fr. John of Avila, his spiritual director, and to whomsoever Fr. Avila should appoint to fill his place. This he fulfilled to the end, in spite of the sacrifices it demanded.

One day he had occasion to call on Monsignor Ramirez, Bishop of Tuy and President of the Royal Chamber of Granada. The prelate was surprised to find his visitor very poorly clad. When questioned, John confessed that he had just exchanged clothes with a beggar. "But," he added, with his humorous smile, "he didn't get a bargain, for mine were worse than his!" Bishop Ramirez began to see that this was no ordinary man. He had heard vague reports of his charitable work, but now he wanted to learn all about it from John's own lips. He put him through a most searching cross-examination, even enquiring about his past life. The Bishop may have suspected John of being one of those fanatics who were springing up in many places, arrogating to themselves the task of reforming the Church, and usually ending up in schism or heresy.

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John realised the purpose of the questioning. He knew that it was the Bishop's duty to prevent any innovations being introduced into the framework of the Church, until they had been closely examined and found satisfactory. It was certainly something new for a group of men to band themselves together and look after the sick poor. Moreover, they were appealing to the public for support and their *bona fides* required to be scrutinized closely. He told the Bishop everything, including the order that had been given to him by the Child to go to Granada, and the name by which the latter had addressed him. At the end of the conversation, the prelate expressed himself satisfied with John's explanations.

"There are two things you must do. In future, you are to be called John of God. This name was given to you under mysterious and possibly miraculous circumstances, and it behoves you to use it.

"In the second place, the clothes you are wearing are unbecoming. I am going to give you a special dress which you and your followers shall wear always. In this way, people will recognise that you have the approval of the Church authorities for your work and will give more readily."

The Bishop believed in doing things on the spot. So he told one of his chaplains to fetch a rough woollen tunic of dark grey material, shaped something like a cassock. To this tunic was attached a hood to cover the head, when required. With his own hands the Bishop clothed John in this garb, telling him to wear it always and to

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have similar ones made for his companions. This is the origin of the habit worn to-day by the Brothers of St. John of God. In 1572, Pope Pius V permitted the Brothers to wear a scapular over this tunic. The leather cincture of St. Augustine was worn around the waist, as the Brothers were to follow the Rule of the Augustinian Order. Later, about 1720, the color of the habit was changed from dark grey to black, as is worn to-day.

Another follower of John's came to him under different circumstances from the three already mentioned. One day John was in a very bad way for money, and decided to call on an Italian banker named Dominic Piola. This man hailed from Genoa and had come to Spain with others of his countrymen at the invitation of the Emperor, Charles V, in order to promote business. Piola was at dinner with his wife when John was ushered in.

"Brother, the poor are in grave need, and I can do nothing for them. Will you help them if you can? For the love of God, please lend me thirty ducats."

Señora Piola was so indignant that she rose from table and left the room with her head in the air. Her husband could not escape so easily, but decided to play the tough business man. "What security can you offer for such a loan?"

John lifted the crucifix out of his basket. "Our Lord's," and he pointed to the figure on the cross.

Piola was taken aback. Without a word he went over to a drawer, drew out the money, and handed it to John.

What Señora Piola said to him when John had gone, we do not know. Evidently she was somewhat of a shrew,

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and could use her tongue to good purpose. Six months later she died. Piola had not been a widower long when he came to John and asked to be admitted among the brethren. John agreed, and assigned to him the duty of assisting in the soliciting of alms. It was he who took John's place at this task after the latter's death. He made rapid progress in virtue, and lived a very edifying life.

CHAPTER XII

EXPANSION OF WORK

There were two hospitals in Granada, the Royal Hospital where John had been a patient and later a nurse, and one other. Neither of these places was popular with intending patients. Those in charge were more interested in feathering their own nests than in seeing that their charges got good treatment. As a result of this, John's little hospital, though most unpretentious and poorly equipped, was besieged with demands for admission. His first house in Lucena Street soon became overcrowded, and he managed to secure a bigger house. This in its turn proved inadequate. With the help of some benefactors he was able to acquire a disused Carmelite monastery which was located in Gomeles Street.

His method of removing was unique. He and his Brothers—we may as well call them that, though strictly

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speaking they were not then a recognised religious community—carried all the beds, furniture and patients on their shoulders. It must have been a strange sight to behold them crossing the town, staggering under the weight of some cripple or paralytic. Probably it did not cause much surprise. There were no other means of conveyance for the poor. The wealthy had their carriages, but the common folk just walked, or at best rode on a donkey.

The new hospital was arranged on the same plan as the old one, except on a bigger scale. The wards were not over-loaded with furniture. There was a cot for each patient with a little crucifix at the head of the bed; a table and a few chairs in the middle of the room: that probably comprised the whole equipment. Women were not received as patients in the beginning, though it seems possible that later on they were accepted. We have not much information on this point. It is very unlikely that the Brothers ever nursed female patients; so John must have had the co-operation of some pious women for this side of his work. This is what occurs even at the present day in some countries like Italy, where a special section of the hospital is set apart for women and is under the charge of nuns or lay nurses.

The new hospital was spacious and contained a big hall in the center. John knew from his own experience how many unfortunate people had to spend their nights in the streets, lying huddled together in some corner where they were sheltered from the biting wind. There was the usual mixture of chronic vagrants among them, fellows who had never worked and never would. Unhap-

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pily, there were also present many decent men who, through misfortune, had lost their employment, and were doomed to vagabondage. Besides the physical sufferings of hunger and cold, there were grave moral dangers through this promiscuous mixing of the sexes in doorways and alleys.

John decided to use the large hall as a night shelter. In the center he installed a big stove and all around the walls he placed cots, or at least mattresses. In all, he was able to accommodate some 200 men. Every night the place was filled. Certificates of character were not demanded; poverty and need were the credentials for admission. Obviously, all his guests were not of the highest stamp. There were some rough diamonds among them. Troublesome characters occasionally gained admission, who, far from being grateful to John, were apt to adopt an insolent and truculent manner.

The ancient Fathers of the Church in treating of the question of charity, were wont to discuss whether inquiries should be made regarding the *bona-fides* of those seeking assistance. St. John Chrysostom would have none of this. He stoutly held that the value of a charitable act lay not with the one who receives, but with the one who gives. We give for the love of God, not because of the personal merits of the recipient, and in this way our action is always good and worthy of heavenly reward. John of God was also of this opinion. He did not ask to prove a man's moral worth before giving him alms. Obviously, he was often imposed upon, but that in no way discouraged him.

There were complaints, of course. Some of the good

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people of the town were scandalised, stating that John had no right to use the alms given him in helping such undesirables. They had heard rumours of fights and brawls. It must be stopped! Charity was one thing, but befriending such riff-raff was not to be tolerated. Lawlessness was only encouraged, and honest folk would not be able to sleep safely in their beds at night if this state of affairs were allowed to continue.

Protests were lodged with John. With a perfectly open countenance he answered that he only knew of one bad character in the hospital, and that was himself. Seeing that they gained nothing in that quarter, they spoke to his spiritual director, a Father Portillo, whom Fr. John of Avila had appointed to act in his stead. Fr. Portillo agreed with them, and commanded John to get rid of all troublesome and unworthy characters, warning him to be careful as to whom he admitted to his hospital in future.

This decision caused John much trouble of mind. On the one hand, he wished to obey his director. On the other, he could not find it in his heart to turn anyone away who was in need, even if he were a bad character. In his perplexity, he decided to write to Fr. John of Avila and submit the matter to him. We have not a copy of what he wrote, but Fr. Avila's reply is still extant:

"My Brother John,

"It is a consolation to me that you are ready to obey Fr. Portillo in your treatment of the poor. If you followed your own inclinations I should have reason to fear that the devil was deceiving you. A master of the

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spiritual life has said that he who listens only to himself does not require the devil to lead him astray. . . . Do not admit into your hospital noisy and quarrelsome fellows, for they will bring it into disrepute. Do not think that you are wanting in charity because you send away an unworthy individual. When a limb is gangrenous it is cut off to save the rest of the body.

"When we are together, I do not worry too much on seeing you act according to your own ideas. Since it has pleased God that I should have care of your soul and we have a sincere affection for one another like two brothers, let us endeavor to remain united. Remember that God did not give you a vocation to direct but to be directed. It is only by obedience that you can serve God well. Obey Fr. Portillo, therefore, as you would myself."

It is clear that Fr. Avila was deeply concerned about John's impulsiveness. There is no doubt at all that he had that fault, if such it can be called. His was the impulsiveness of an over-ardent charity. When he came across someone in need, he gave all he had, never stopping to think whether the money was required for other purposes. When remonstrated with, he used to reply that God wishes us to do the act of charity that is in front of us at the moment; He Himself will take care of future ones. Obviously, this is a counsel which it takes a saint to fulfil, but which in the hands of another might well be deemed an imprudence.

One day a group of workmen presented themselves at

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the hospital. They were unemployed and had no means of obtaining food for themselves and their families. Nobody took any interest in them, neither those for whom they were wont to work nor the civil authorities. Literally starving, they had come to John as a last resource. He chanced to have just brought in a basketful of bread and meat and was getting it ready for the dinner. One look at their pinched faces was enough! His heart throbbed with pity, for he could never send them away hungry. With tears in his eyes, he pushed the bread and meat over to them. They rushed at it like famished animals, stuffing their mouths and pockets. Then he took out his purse and emptied the coins on the table. At these also they grabbed. All that he had was gone, the patients' dinner and the means of providing another. There is no record that St. Raphael came to help him on this occasion, though we imagine he must have found some way out of the difficulty.

A saint can be, at times, an awkward person to have about a place. One day John was stopped in the street by several men who begged a bite to eat. He had nothing to give them, but that did not dismay him. Telling them to wait a minute, he entered the nearby house of a gentleman whom he knew and rushed straight to the kitchen. The cook was absent, but the dinner was simmering on the stove and giving off a succulent odor. With no other thought in his mind than that of the hungry men, he grabbed the pot off the fire and, gathering up some bread, ran out into the street. The cook, however, had caught a glimpse of the retreating figure and, dis-

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covering his loss, charged after him, brandishing a knife, and yelling "thief!" What was his astonishment and embarrassment when he saw who it was who had stolen the dinner! He went in and told his master what had happened. At first, there was a storm of indignation; but in true Latin fashion it soon blew over. There were other things to eat in the house, and it made a good after-dinner story, sure to arouse merriment among the guests, to tell how John of God stole the dinner.

His acts of charity were not always so well received. One cold winter's day he met an ex-soldier on the street. A biting wind was blowing, and the poor fellow shivered in his few rags of tattered uniform. John offered to exchange clothes with him. The soldier probably had already put up with a good few gibes, and he thought that this was another impudent fellow trying to take a rise out of him. He flew into a rage and cursed and swore as only an old soldier can. The other waited patiently, he had been through hardships himself and knew how nature can be strained to the breaking-point. The soldier stopped at last, having exhausted his vocabulary. Indeed, when he had calmed down, one look into John's eyes showed him that he had been mistaken. In those eyes he saw nothing but compassion and understanding. Ashamed of his outburst, he mumbled his thanks and the exchange was made.

The suspicion that surrounded John took a long time to die out, and sometimes it caused him to meet with strange adventures. One evening, he called on the wealthy Marquis of Terifa to ask for alms for his sick poor. The

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Marquis was playing cards with a group of friends. They all put their hands in their pockets and, between them, raised twenty-five ducats, which was quite a handsome sum. When John had departed, the conversation turned naturally to what had just occurred. Some maintained that he was a saint; others thought that he might be a fraud. In true sporting fashion, bets were laid. Then came the question as to how they were to decide the issue. The face of the young Marquis lit up. He had a plan. They could leave it in his hands. In half-an-hour he would be back with an answer to their doubts.

Rushing up to his room, the Marquis changed into some old clothes, and, with his hat pulled well down over his eyes, hurried after John. He came up with him just outside the hospital, and relying on the darkness to mask his identity, poured out a sad story of how he was a nobleman who had fallen on hard times and was badly in need of some money to buy food for himself and his family. John listened to him sympathetically.

"Brother, I am sorry for you, and will give you the money that I have on me." And, opening his purse, he poured into the hands of the astonished Marquis the twenty-five ducats he had just received at Terifa's house.

The latter hurried home and changed his clothes. When he rejoined his guests, he was greeted with shouts and laughter.

"How did you get on?"

"Who has won the bet?"

The Marquis sat down and related what had happened.

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"You mean to say that he turned over the whole of the twenty-five ducats?"

The Marquis nodded his head. "And he did not recognise me, I am sure; he took me for a stranger in need, and handed over to me all that he possessed."

"Well, those who backed him for a saint have won," shouted one of the company. "I propose that each one put his winnings in the kitty, together with the twenty-five ducats, and that the whole lot be given to John for his hospital."

The next morning the Marquis called at the hospital. "Well, Brother John, I hear that you were robbed last night."

"No, sire, nobody robbed me of anything."

"You were, John, whether you know it or not. An impostor managed to get twenty-five ducats out of you."

"Sire, I gave for the love of God as he asked me. If the man told a lie, that is his look-out and not mine."

Laughingly, the Marquis told the story of the bet. He then handed back to John the twenty-five ducats together with one hundred and fifty golden scudi—the total of the bets. John's sense of humor enabled him to appreciate the hoax.

In spite of their simplicity and innocence, the saints can be tough on occasion. One of John's self-appointed tasks of mercy was to bury the bodies of those who were found dead in the streets. It paints a grim picture of the poverty and misery then prevailing in Granada that such things could happen. Early one morning a man came running to the hospital. An old man had died in the street

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during the night and his body was still lying there. John hurried to the scene at once. People were passing by, but nobody seemed to pay any attention to it. Such sights, alas, were only too common.

John lifted the poor dead body on his shoulders and set off for the hospital. He had very little money at the time, and decided to stop on his way and beg the price of a shroud. Accordingly he went to the house of a wealthy man and, laying the corpse on the doorstep, went inside. But the gentleman was not in good humor.

"I have no money to be throwing away on dead bodies," he shouted.

John was indignant at this callousness, but kept his temper. "This poor man is as much your brother as mine. You have more means than I of providing him with a decent burial. I will leave it to you to discharge this duty of Christian charity."

So saying, he turned on his heel and walked out, leaving the corpse on the threshold! When the man realised that on his very doorstep was lying a dead body which nobody thought fit to remove, he was enraged. He stormed at his servants to take the corpse away, but they were too superstitious to touch it. The civil authorities were too slow as he knew from experience. It might be days before they got round to it. How could he live with that pestilential horror lying at his front door? There was only one way out. John of God had played a grisly joke on him, but he was the one person who could handle the situation. A messenger was dispatched to the hospital, begging

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John to return and promising him the price of twenty shrouds if only he would take the body away at once. So a rich man learned a lesson and a poor man was given a decent burial.

CHAPTER XIII

HELPER OF THE NEEDY

John's biggest difficulty was finding money to provide food, clothing and medicines for the sick in his hospital. Apart from his patients, there were many others in need in Granada, whom he helped. One of his letters which has been preserved gives a good picture of his worries:

"This letter will give you some idea of how greatly I am afflicted and in want, for which, however, I give thanks to Our Lord Jesus Christ. My dearly beloved brother in Christ, the number of poor people who come here seeking help is so great that I am often astonished how we manage to assist them. But Jesus Christ looks after all and provides them with something to eat. For the wood alone, we need seven or eight ducats a day. The city is so big and it is very cold, particularly at this winter season. . . .

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“So many poor flock to this house of God. Between bed cases, those who can get around, and attendants, we number more than 110. This being a general hospital, we receive every kind of case. Thus we have cripples, paralytics, lepers, deaf and dumb, insane, those with skin diseases, and old people and children, besides counting many pilgrims and vagrants who call here. To these latter we supply heat, water, salt and other condiments for the food. We have no income for all this, but Jesus Christ provides for everything. Every day it costs four and a half to five ducats to buy meat, flour and wood, not counting medicines and clothing which are an additional expense. When the daily alms do not suffice to meet the expenses, I buy on credit. If I cannot get this, we fast.

“In this way I find myself in debt solely for the love of Jesus Christ. I owe more than two hundred ducats to pay for shirts, boots, sheets, woollen blankets and for many other things required in this house of God; also for the upbringing of the babies whose mothers have brought them here. Thus, beloved brother in Jesus Christ, seeing myself so much in debt it often happens that I do not go out of the house. Seeing so many poor people, who are my brothers and equals, in such great necessities either of body or soul and not being able to help them makes me very sad. With all this I place my trust only in Jesus Christ Who will free me from all debts because He knows the secrets of my heart. That is

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why I say, unhappy the man who puts his confidence in men and not in Jesus Christ. Whether he wills it or not, he will be abandoned by men, whilst Jesus is faithful and constant and provides for all. May all thanks be given to Him for ever, Amen, Jesus."

We have already mentioned the acute distress that prevailed in the city of Granada. In spite of the cares imposed on him by his hospital and the difficulties he had in making ends meet, John did not hesitate to go to the relief of all those whom he found to be in need. As his letter above shows, his motto was: "Jesus Christ will provide." In time he came to be the Vincent de Paul of Granada. All the poor and helpless turned to him as to their father and protector, and somehow he found means of assisting them all. It was a herculean task.

One day he came across a group of youngsters, half-starved and in rags. They had no home, belonged to nobody, but just wandered around living on garbage and what they could steal. Children are always the most tragic victims of troubled times. We had a recent example in the "shoe-shine" boys of Italy. John immediately felt responsible for the welfare of these youngsters. What could he do? Their most pressing need was for some kind of clothing, but he had nothing at the hospital that would fit children.

Close by was a clothing dealer to whom he was well known. He told the little band to follow him and, to their speechless amazement, marched them all into the shop. They gazed at the display of clothes with wide-open

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eyes, for many of them had never worn a piece of new clothing in their lives. When they realised that John was going to fit them out, their joy knew no bounds. They clapped their hands, and danced about the place. But the happiest of the lot was John. His face beamed as he removed their dirty rags and helped them into the new clothes. He was in his element. We do not know what were the reactions of the clothier—but he must have been a good sort, for he supplied everything on credit, and took John's word that he would be paid.

The most unfortunate are not always those who appear so. There are hidden miseries which cause untold sufferings, mainly because they are hidden. John possessed a kind of sixth sense in detecting such unhappiness. Following a tradition as old as Christianity, there were in Granada in those days, pious women who lived in the world, but who had dedicated their lives to God by vow. They were akin to the Beguines of Flanders who were so numerous during the Middle Ages. Their usual occupation was the spinning and weaving of cloth, yet often they faced abject and dire poverty.

John took a number of these poor women under his care, buying them wool for spinning and selling the products of their labor. More than that, he encouraged them in their good dispositions. The stress of poverty so easily led to discouragement, followed by the temptation to renounce the vows. We can picture John sitting on a low stool, his bare feet protruding from underneath his ragged habit, his luminous eyes ablaze with a divine fire. A short distance away, seated at a spinning wheel, somberly garbed in black, was a pious woman listening

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intently to the words of this ragged man as he spoke to her of God and the things of God.

Not only did John look after the pious women of Granada, he also labored for those whom sin had dragged down into the depths. Often, as he sought out the sick in squalid garrets and backrooms, he had come into contact with what is euphemistically termed the "gay life." He saw that the gaiety which surrounded it was only a mask to hide the sordid reality. It could be compared to those paintings of the dance of death where skeletons make merry with ghoulish grins. John's heart went out to the women who were doomed to such a life of shame and degradation. He understood that in many cases it was not wholly their fault. They were the victims of parental indifference, or the broken promises of unscrupulous men.

Moral sickness is more to be deplored than physical ailments. It causes more suffering and unhappiness. John was not one to shrug his shoulders and pass on. He appreciated all the difficulties and dangers involved in working for the reform of morals; but, fortified by a letter of advice from Fr. Avila who, while warning him to take every precaution, gave the project his sanction, he set about it with his usual energy. He chose Friday for his visits, that being the day on which Our Lord suffered for such sinners. All he took with him was his crucifix and his love for God and souls.

There is no use pretending that he emptied all the houses of ill-fame in a day. He did not, by any means. It was an uphill, laborious and often heart-breaking task. Some of those whom he thought to be converted, fell

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back into their old ways. Others deliberately feigned amendment in order to get money from him, and then went their way, laughing at him for a fool. But the work produced results. Wisely, from the start, John sought the co-operation of charitable women to assist him in this most delicate work of reclaiming these unfortunate women and girls. They took care of the Magdalens and helped them to gain an honest livelihood. Many of these girls married. Sixteen of them were married together in the same church on one occasion. It must have been a happy day for John.

But in spite of the ardor with which he devoted himself to alleviating distress, there were many critics of his work. The principal complaint made against him was that he did not exercise sufficient care in selecting those whom he assisted. The old cry was raised again that he was squandering the alms he received on worthless individuals. There was, no doubt, much to be said for the point of view of his critics. They maintained that only the worthy should be helped, because assisting a wrongdoer was tantamount to encouraging him in his evil ways.

While admitting the force of their arguments, John could not see eye to eye with them. Much less could he bring himself to put their doctrine into practice. He believed that a hungry man should be fed. It was time enough to investigate his moral character once this pressing need was satisfied. Besides, if all who did not measure up to a rigid scale of morality were rejected from our charity, would that be likely to improve them? John believed that, on the contrary, it would make them more bitter and perverse. He had great confidence in the power

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of charity for winning over souls. A crust of bread and a kind word will do more to convert sinners, than all the admonitions and reproaches in the world.

The second accusation leveled at him was that he too easily incurred debts. He was classed as imprudent and improvident because he did not adhere to the classical concept of economy and keep his expenditure always within the range of his income. The impression given was that he did not mind incurring debts and did not trouble about whether he could repay them. Now this was contrary to the truth. His conscience was as well formed as that of his accusers. He knew that to contract debts beyond our means of repaying is an injustice. But he did not count on natural means for wiping off his debts; he relied on Divine Providence.

The campaign set on foot by his detractors gathered momentum. They hoped to blacken him in the eyes of the public, cut off the contributions, thus forcing him to close down the hospital. An offer was even made to take over the hospital and clear off the debts if he would but consent to retire. John was naturally worried at all this criticism. In his humility, he thought that he might be at fault and that it would be better for him to give up a work at which he had failed. He put his doubts before Fr. John of Avila. The latter wrote back:

“Whoever came to advise you to give up your charitable work must have been a devil in disguise. He was out to deceive you in trying to show that you could leave the state to which God has called you, without offending Him. Listen to what St. Paul

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says: 'Walk worthy of the vocation to which you are called.' And the Gospel tells us that only he who perseveres to the end shall be saved."

A *postscriptum* to this letter runs:

"I have no clothes to send you, but I will say some Masses for you."

John must have been begging even from his spiritual director!

Even in the street he had to endure harsh treatment. One day he was coming down the Alhambra Hill, bending under the weight of a load of wood. Advancing towards him was a man dressed in the rich garb of a nobleman. As they came abreast in the narrow street, John rubbed up against the dandy's cloak and it slipped off his shoulders on to the ground.

"Look where you are going, you old fool!"

John was full of apologies. "Pardon me, brother, it was an accident."

The man flushed scarlet with anger. An old beggar in the street daring to call him *brother*! It was an affront to a member of the nobility. He would teach him respect for his betters. He drew back and gave John a resounding smack on the face. The latter looked up at him mildly, the red weals of the blow standing out against the pale skin. "I am sorry, brother, if I have offended you." He then proceeded on his way.

We are told that, later on, the dandy learned that the

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poor old man he had struck in the street was none other than John of God, the saint of Granada. Ashamed of his action, he hurried to the hospital to ask forgiveness. John received him with great kindness and simply laughed at the incident as if it had been a good joke.

On another occasion, a little imp of a page boy seeing John standing beside a fountain in the courtyard of some public offices, gave him a push and sent him sprawling into the water. John must have been sorely tempted to lay the little rascal across his knees and give him the flogging he deserved. Instead, he simply laughed as if the whole thing was very amusing.

Passing one day through the lower quarters of the town, he bumped into a number of Arabs lounging at a street corner. They were some of those who had chosen to remain in Spain, when the Moors had capitulated after the Spanish conquest of Granada. Though nominally Catholic, they really hated Christians. Feeling themselves safe, one of them, bolder than his fellows, shouted at John: "Tell me, Christian, what miracles has your Christ ever done?"

John looked his interlocutor squarely between the eyes. "It is no small miracle that He gives me the grace not to push my fist into your face."

Even those whom he had befriended and helped the most, sometimes repaid him with abuse. A woman called at the hospital to beg some clothes. She was one of those whom John had rescued from a life of shame. He was not able to give her at once what she wanted, and asked her to return next day. But this did not suit her at all.

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She flew into a rage. "You hypocrite. A fine saint you are, putting the money of the poor into your own pocket. I'll show you up before the whole of Granada."

John stood by meekly as if he had earned this abuse. When she paused for breath, he offered a coin. "Go and repeat all that you have just said about me on the public square so that everyone can hear, and I will give you this alms."

The woman gazed at him in wonderment, and then, abashed by his humility, she slunk away.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BURNING HOSPITAL

He was busy about his usual tasks in the hospital one day, when the door was pushed open violently and a couple of men rushed in panting:

"The Royal Hospital is on fire!"

John stopped to hear no more. Like a shot he was out through the door and running as fast as his legs would carry him. Out of all the side streets people were hurrying, for the news had spread quickly, and already a pall of smoke was rising.

When he arrived in the square, smoke was pouring from the windows of the hospital. Attendants, and those patients who were able, were hurrying out through the doors. What rivetted everybody's attention was the pitiable sight of the patients on the upper floors, silhouetted against the windows by the light of the flames and crying

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out to those below to save them. But nobody stirred. It seemed madness to venture into the burning building. As people on the square recognised that their children, relatives and friends were trapped in the flames, a shriek of desperation arose. Could nothing be done for all those poor cripples unable to save themselves? And the unfortunate insane locked in their cells! Were they to be left to roast alive?

Suddenly a man burst out from the crowd, and hastened towards the main door of the hospital. He was recognised, and a shout was raised:

“John of God! John of God!”

All eyes were intently fixed on him as he tore into the burning building. A few moments later he was seen to emerge, bearing in his arms a helpless old man, while two or three cripples clung to his habit. Depositing his burden into the arms that were eagerly stretched out, he turned back into the hospital. A few more moments and he again appeared, carrying another patient and guiding others after him.

The spectators stood rooted to the ground. Nobody ventured to accompany John into the burning building. There was something uncanny about the situation. One would almost think that the fire was being held back by unseen hands in order to give him time to rescue the patients. He was handling the whole thing masterfully, and it would be the height of folly to interfere with what appeared to be bordering on the miraculous.

In little groups of three or four, the patients were evacuated. John had spent two years in that hospital, and

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he knew every nook and corner. Besides, his mere presence on the scene had given courage to the patients. Instead of huddling together, paralysed with fear, they obeyed his instructions. When he was among them, they felt themselves capable of any act of heroism.

Down on the square the most touching sights were being witnessed. Mothers were hysterically fondling their rescued children. Husband and wife, who had never hoped to meet again, were clasped in each other's arms. Sons and daughters were embracing a loving father or mother whom they had just seen rescued from a horrible death.

All the sick were out of the burning building. As the fire had still not gained too great a headway, John began to throw blankets, sheets and even mattresses out of the windows. Eagerly the crowd ran forward to catch them. The weather was cold and the patients' clothes were lost beyond recovery. If they were not to catch pneumonia, they would need covering. Placed on mattresses, the warm blankets were wrapped around them. Meanwhile, nobody would leave the square until they had seen John of God in safety. When would he give up his prodigious task?

The fire brigades of those days were slow and ponderous affairs. Now they came along, hauling a cannon, intending to knock down some of the building so as to prevent the fire from spreading. What the fire spared, they would probably destroy! From a window, John could be seen making frantic signs for them to wait. He knew the value of the hospital to the poor people of the city, and he did not want to see any part of it damaged where that could be avoided. A moment later a shout went up. John was

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out on the roof, and with an axe in his hand, he was hacking at the slates and timbers. His intention was clear: to try to divide the burning section from the rest of the building, and so prevent the fire from spreading. The crowd below stood motionless and silent as they watched the lone worker deal tremendous blows at the roof. Each stroke of the axe sent up a shower of sparks and burning timbers. Would he be able to cut it in time? Will he escape with his own life?

The roof was cut, and the flames were thus prevented from damaging any further portion of the hospital. A tremendous cheer arose, then died as if the watchers were suddenly struck dumb. At that moment a great tongue of flame shot up and enveloped the hero. There was a crash, and he disappeared. An awesome silence settled on the throng. John of God was dead! There could be no doubt about that. After saving others from the greedy flames, he had fallen a victim to them himself. Bitterly they reproached themselves for allowing him to undertake such a grave risk. He should have been forced to leave the building once the patients were saved. What was a building worth in comparison with his life? What would the sick and poor of Granada do without him?

While they were bemoaning, and blaming themselves for having let him take so many risks, a man was seen to emerge from the doorway through which poured smoke and fire. He walked calmly as if he were doing the most ordinary thing in the world. Who could it be? Surely nobody could pass through that raging inferno without being reduced to a cinder. Then a cry rang out in the square, and was taken up by every voice:

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"John of God is safe! The Father of the poor has escaped unharmed!"

They crowded around him to assure themselves that he was really unhurt. There was not even the mark of a burn on his clothing. All that had suffered were his eyebrows, and these never grew again.

Some years later the Governor of Granada and seventy witnesses gave evidence of this happening during the process of John's beatification. The Church inserted this miracle in the decree of the saint's canonisation. The Collect of the Mass for the feast of St. John of God on March 8th also refers to it. "O God, Who didst suffer our Blessed Father John, when burning with Thy love, to pass unscathed through the flames, and by this means didst beget a new offspring to Thy Church, grant through his merits that our vices may be healed by the fire of Thy love and that we may receive remedies unto life everlasting. Amen."

This heroic act raised him considerably in the general esteem, but it did not by any means remove all his troubles. He was forever faced with the problem of paying his debts, and finding sufficient money to help all those who clamored for assistance. One of his letters gives us some idea of his worries. It also shows the unpleasant side of the work he had undertaken for the poor:

"This letter is to let you know how I am and also to acquaint you with my troubles, sorrows and needs. These go on increasing every day. It is partly on account of the debt, and also because of the poor. These latter flock here every day. Many of them

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arrive bare-footed and in rags. They are often covered with sores and insects so that it is necessary to keep a couple of men doing nothing else than boiling their clothes in a big cauldron so as to rid them of insects. This task will have to be continued all through the winter and up to next May. So you see, my dear sister in Jesus Christ, that my worries grow every day greater and greater."

With companions to help him in the work of the hospital, he pushed his begging expeditions farther afield, going as far as Toledo and Cordoba. In the early morning, he did the most pressing work in the hospital, then visited the beds of all the patients in turn, speaking a kind and edifying word to each one, and rendering any little services they needed. The love for the sick and the poor which consumed his heart made it a necessity for him to spend all the time he could spare among them. Indeed, he had not taken upon himself the office of alms-collector because he liked mixing with people and busying himself with a lot of affairs. On the contrary, had he followed his own inclinations, he would never have left the bedside of his patients. He went soliciting alms because it was the hardest job of the whole lot, requiring him to leave the hospital about ten o'clock in the morning, frequently not returning until eleven o'clock at night. All his journeys, even the most distant, were made on foot; neither did he cover his feet nor his head in any kind of weather.

In spite of his superhuman efforts, however, he could not manage to pay his bills. Many there were who gloated

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over this. They were the perennial critics of any good work, who were too mean to offer help, but hated to see others do so. John took his troubles to the Archbishop of Granada. This prelate had already visited the hospital in order to investigate complaints that money was being squandered. On the contrary, he found the hospital neat and well-ordered, and was so impressed by the spirit of holiness and charity which prevailed, that he had become John's ardent admirer and supporter.

The good Archbishop listened sympathetically while John gave an account of his expeditions to the castles of the rich in search of alms. In spite of their generosity—and John had many good friends among the aristocracy—it did not suffice to maintain the ever-increasing number of sick and poor who depended on him. The narration over, the Archbishop placed the tips of his fingers together and smiled. "John, you will have to attempt something big. There is nothing else for it. You must go to the Royal Court and try and interest the King in your work."

This was certainly an ambitious project! He had spent his life tending sheep or soldiering, and so had had little chance of education, none whatever of learning Court etiquette. And now he was being bidden to visit the most brilliant Court in Europe. He was not dismayed, however, at his lack of external trappings; indeed, being the very soul of simplicity, it never occurred to him to wonder what impression he would make. Had he bothered to think of it, he would probably have laughed heartily at the incongruity of a shaggy mountaineer like himself mixing with elegant courtiers.

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The King resided at Valladolid, some 400 miles from Granada. It was the Autumn of 1547 when John set out to make the journey on foot. He took as companion, Brother Peter Velasco, whom he had rescued from hanging. Brother Anthony Martin, who had been the other party in the trial, was left in charge of the hospital. John had always been a great walker, and this was not the first time that he had crossed Spain from end to end. Now, however, he was fifty-two, and older than his years because of the excessive austerities and fatigues he had inflicted on his body. Moreover, he always went barefooted and bare-headed, and tramping over the muddy roads, facing the keen winds and pelting rain with such meagre clothing, seemed foolhardy. As usual, John thought little of these things; God would take care of them. So he and Brother Peter said good-bye to their companions and to the patients, and set off on their long trek.

Up hill and down dale they plodded, with no money to provide for their wants. John would never have thought of spending money on himself when it was so urgently required for the patients' needs. They gained their food, as he had always done on similar journeys, by cutting faggots in the wood and exchanging them at a peasant's house for a mouthful to eat and a corner to lie in for the night.

At Toledo they were well received. Donna Leonora de Mendoza, a relative of the Duchess of Sessa, one of the greatest benefactresses of John's work, insisted on their staying in her castle. They would have preferred staying

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at the local hospital, where they would have felt more at home, but they could not refuse this pious lady. Donna Mendoza was sad because she was childless, and begged John's prayers for the blessing of a son and heir. He astonished and delighted her by foretelling that she would become the mother of three children. In time this prophecy was fulfilled to the letter.

The authorities of Toledo were so favorably impressed by what they had heard of the hospital in Granada, that they desired John to start a similar one in their city. He was unable to comply with their request right away, but the following year he sent a Brother for this purpose. A document written at the time by the Vicar-General of the diocese, gives an interesting description of John and his work.

"There is in Granada a man who lives in simplicity and Christian poverty. His name is John of God. Of humble birth, he is not versed in letters or doctrine, but with incredible zeal he practises Christian charity and occupies himself entirely with the care of the poor. He looks after more than two hundred sick people who are without means of support and afflicted with various diseases.

"His clothing is similar to that of Chinese philosophers. He wears a long tunic of coarse material and carries a sack on his back. This sack does not contain parchments and learned writings, but is designed to receive alms. He always goes about with the head and feet bare. His exterior poverty is a

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sign of his interior humility. . . . To princes from whom he solicits alms for his poor and for his hospital he speaks frankly but without pose or arrogance.

"Last year, he came here to Toledo to find out if the inhabitants were as well disposed as Christians ought to be towards the sick and poor. Satisfied that they were, he shortly afterwards sent among us a man named Ferdinand, in every way like himself in respect of dress, zeal and profession.

"During the day he moves around the streets and squares, and even without speaking he obtains alms. During the night, through the same streets, and like the cock at daybreak, he calls all men to their daily duty. As soon as the sun has gone down and everyone has retired to his house, with untiring zeal, he calls out for them to remember the poor."

CHAPTER XV

AT THE COURT OF SPAIN

At last, they arrived at Valladolid. It was a magnificent city with royal palaces and splendid churches, its streets full of gay carriages carrying the nobility to and from the Court. But John had no eyes for this; for him, there were the churches, and most certainly the hospitals, where he and his companion probably found shelter.

He was acquainted with the Count of Tondillo. Through the latter's good offices, he was able to obtain an audience with the Prince Philip, for the Emperor Charles V was away, engaged in one of his many wars. The young Prince was then about twenty years of age. On the retirement of his father, he was to ascend the throne as King Philip II. Titian's famous painting of him hangs in the Prado at Madrid, depicting a young man dressed in the elegant style of the knights of those days,

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with handsome features and sad eyes. Later on, he was to be involved in the politics of England by his marriage with Mary Tudor. It was he also who sent the ill-fated Armada to conquer England, and free it from the Protestant rule of Elizabeth. To the Spaniards, Philip was "the prudent king." To the Protestants, against whom he fought all his life, he was "the demon of the South."

John's historians stress the fact that he tried to make the best of himself for the audience. The prince, who was an excellent Catholic and a loyal son of the Church, received the pilgrim kindly, and at once there arose for John the problem of how he should address him. With his usual directness and simplicity he went straight to the point. "Sire, I am in the habit of speaking to all men and calling them Brother, since we are all brothers in Jesus Christ. You are my prince and lord, in what way do you commend me to address you?"

The prince smiled at this original way of beginning an audience. "John, call me what you like."

"Alright, I will call you Good Prince, and may God give you the grace to reign long, to govern well and to save your soul."

It was the simple wish of a man of the people, not the polished flattery of a courtier. It must have pleased Philip, for he listened attentively while John gave an account of his work. At the close of the audience, he gave the petitioner a regal alms, and, what was probably more valuable, a special recommendation to his two sisters, the Infanta Juana and the Infanta Maria.

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The two princesses were charmed with John. They heaped money and gifts on him, as did also the other ladies of the Court. During his stay in Valladolid he acted as the unofficial Royal Almoner, and was not long in finding out just as much misery and want in that gay city as in Granada. Only a few years earlier, Christopher Columbus had died there in obscure poverty, and there were many like him, who had once been in comfortable circumstances, but had now fallen on evil days. Nobody knew them nor cared about them. Whether they lived or died was of little concern to anybody. But John of God made their position his concern. He found them out in the garrets where they had retreated to hide their misery and want. The gold and jewels of the noble ladies were turned into food and clothing and distributed amongst them, so that they looked upon John as an angel sent into their midst. So busy was he in his new-found occupation, that he seemed to have forgotten the purpose that had brought him to Valladolid. Brother Peter Velasco remembered, however, and sometimes he would drop a hint that there were many poor in Granada awaiting his return. The reply was always the same: "Brother, it is all the same whether we give here or give in Granada. We are doing good for the love of God, and that is all that counts."

For nine months John remained in Valladolid. Such a delay seems surprising, considering the many responsibilities and the debts that were his in far-off Granada. It is not that he was dazzled with the attentions of the Court

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ladies, or carried away with the novelty of having so much money at his disposal. There was dire want and misery in Valladolid as in so many other wealthy cities where the palaces of the nobles stood not very far from the slums of the poor. Not all the former were hard-hearted. John found many among the wealthy who were imbued with the highest principles of Christian charity. But the rich and the poor were not, as it were, in touch, one with the other. The former were growing more wealthy with the influx of gold from America. The latter were feeling the pinch of hunger, because so much food was being shipped to the new Colonies that there was a scarcity at home, with a consequent rise in prices.

Throughout all those parts of Europe where the Protestant reform was gaining ground, monasteries and religious houses were being closed down. These establishments had long acted as the natural channels whereby some of the wealth of the nobility found its way into the needy hands of the common people. With their disappearance, the poor lost their helpers and protectors, and were reduced to a miserable state. It is true that the Reformation did not make much advance in Spain. Here the sad condition of the lower classes was due rather to the defects in the administration of hospitals, institutions and charitable trusts. Those who were charged with such responsibility thought more of benefiting themselves than of serving the necessitous. The Council of Trent, which had already begun its work in 1545, two years before the time of which we write, was to make a notable contribution towards the reform of these sad conditions.

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One of its decrees was that every person charged with the administration of a hospital should be held to strict account and, in case of irregularities, be removed from office and obliged to make restitution. It also gave the bishops the right to visit the hospitals and to see that everyone connected with them discharged his duties properly.

So John remained in Valladolid. While there was good to be done, he was satisfied to stay. There was nothing of the partisan about him. He had no pet charities. One of his favorite sayings was: "Do charity here or do it there, it is all the same." He felt that God's work was to be done in Valladolid, as elsewhere, and he was ready to do it for as long as it would please the Divine Majesty to inspire him to labor there.

Although he may not have been aware of it, he was carrying out a useful apostolate among the ladies of the Court. He would have laughed at the idea that anyone would ever have wanted spiritual direction from him: for that he considered himself not adequately qualified. Nevertheless, as we see from the letters which have been preserved and which were written by him at a later date to the Duchess of Sessa, he was well able to point out the road to sanctity. These letters, by the way, are still extant in the mother house of the Order at Rome, and it is clear from the handwriting that he possessed a certain culture and was not unused to expressing his thoughts on paper. In one he writes:

"Good Duchess, whenever you feel sad and depressed, have recourse to the Passion of Our Lord

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Jesus Christ and to His Precious Wounds, and you will experience great consolation. Consider His life. What was it but one long round of labor in order to set us the example? By day He preached, and by night He prayed. Why then should we, poor sinners and worms that we are, seek comfort and riches. If we were masters of the whole world, we should not be any better for this. And if we had more riches than we have, we should not be any the more content. He alone is happy who, despising all things, sets his heart on Jesus Christ, Who gives all for all, as you desire to do, good duchess. Say that you love Jesus Christ more than anything in the world, and in Him and for Him love your fellow-men. Thus you will save your soul."

The advice he gives to this noble lady is most practical. With servants to carry out her slightest whims, what more easy than to drift into a life of idle boredom as did so many of her class. He counsels her, then, to have some occupation, and cites as a model Our Blessed Lord. He also warns her against a too great desire for riches and comfort. It is almost a paraphrase of the words of Christ: "What doth it profit a man to gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his own soul?" In another letter he treats of the question of vocation and sanctity:

"Each of us must walk along the road laid down by God. Some are called to be monks, others clerics, others hermits and again many are called to the married state. In whatever state of life God calls

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us, we can save our souls if we wish. All this you know better than I do, good duchess, and that is why I am pleased to speak with someone who understands me. We owe three things to God: Love, Service, Reverence. We must love Him as Our Heavenly Father above all things else in the world. We must serve Him as our Master, not so much on account of the reward that He promises, but because of the charms of His goodness. With reverence, as to our Maker, never pronouncing His Holy Name except to thank Him and bless Him."

At last, the most pressing needs of the needy of Valladolid were satisfied, and John and his companion were free to take their departure. Probably he arranged to send one of his disciples to continue the work begun by him, as he did the following year at Toledo. Peter Velasco, in spite of his veneration for his holy father, John of God, must have had some doubts as to whether there would be any money left by the time they reached Granada. He knew John's saying by heart: "Practise charity here or practise it there, it is all the same." They would meet plenty of beggars on the road during their return journey, and John would have many opportunities of putting his slogan into practice. In a prudent endeavour to salvage some of the alms for the poor of Granada, Peter Velasco approached the Duchess of Mendoza and the Marquis of Montejár, two generous benefactors of John's work, and asked them to make their donations payable only in Granada. In this way they would have something to show for their nine months' absence.

CHAPTER XVI

TOWARDS THE END

Back in Granada, John took up the threads of his life again. The money he had brought back from the Court paid his debts, but the sick came to him in even greater numbers than before. His charity would not allow him to turn any of them away, and before long he was deep in debt again. Although only in his early fifties, his life was drawing to its close. His body was exhausted by his tremendous labors and austerities, and in less than three years he would have gone to his heavenly reward.

He probably had a presentiment that his days were numbered. As if all that he had accomplished so far were nothing—and this would be his own estimate of its value—he threw himself with even greater ardor into the securing of help for the sick and the work of his own sanctification. To him, working for the sick and striving to

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become a saint were one and the same thing. His outstanding virtue was the love of God. We can say the same of every saint, for it is this that constitutes holiness and perfection. If we love God, we must love our fellow-men. It is God's own command: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart . . . and thy neighbor as thyself." We must love God for His Own sake and our neighbor for God's sake. The measure of our love of God is the measure of our love of our fellow-beings.

All the saints understood this and, in one way or another, they devoted themselves with selfless devotion to the welfare of their fellow-men. This may not appear to be so in the case of contemplatives and hermits who had little or no contact with others. They may even seem to have been so wrapt up in the affairs of their own souls as to be indifferent to others. It is true that they sanctified themselves. This was their first task, as it is everybody's first task, for it is the true meaning of the saying that charity begins at home. But their life was not confined to a preoccupation with self. How could it be? Well did they know that God's supreme desire is that all men should be saved. His purpose in creating the world is for man to gain a glorious eternity in Heaven. Therefore, the saints worked with all the generosity of their ardent natures for the salvation of their fellow-men.

Their means to achieve this end may have differed in the externals. Some lived a life shut off from the world, absorbed in prayer and penance. They were power-houses of grace, and it was through their merits that men were turned from their sinful ways. St. Francis Xavier carried

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the good tidings of the Gospel to the heathens of Japan and India, at the cost of incredible labors and sufferings. St. Dominic went around preaching the word of God and converting heretics at home. St. Francis of Assisi taught men to love poverty rather than riches and to take pleasure in the simple things that God has provided in such abundance. Nearer our own day, the Little Flower of Carmel, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, gave to us the much-needed reminder that it is not necessary to do extraordinary things to become a saint; it is enough to do God's Will in our everyday life. This is the secret of her "Little Way."

John of God also worked for the salvation of his fellow-men. This was the purpose that motivated everything he did. In his own day he saw how want and misery turned many away from church and clergy, even when it did not wholly turn them against God. Christ preached poverty and gave an example of it in His own life, but He never advocated destitution. He called blessed, the poor in spirit: those who are detached from the goods of this world. St. Thomas Aquinas lists both extreme riches and extreme poverty as being equally dangerous to the soul, because they both tend to draw man away from God.

John of God tended the bodies of the sick and relieved their poverty, so that he might reach their souls. He loved the poor and, for their sakes, he gladly lived as one of them. He found so many embittered by their sufferings, that he wanted to help them all, to make them happy. His was no idle dream, nor the passing whim of a philanthropist. In spite of all his immense labors, he knew that

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he could never hope to eliminate sickness and poverty from the earth. To-day, Communists would probably acclaim him as one of themselves. They would say that, like themselves, he worked and suffered for the betterment of the proletariat. This is true, and no one labored harder than he to bring about a more equal distribution of wealth, spending himself in visiting the palaces and castles of the rich in order to get alms for the relief of the poor. But he was no advocate of class hatred. He reminded the well-to-do in the strongest terms that it was a moral duty to help their less fortunate brethren. If God had given them riches, it was not merely for selfish enjoyment, but in order that they might be in a position to help those who were not similarly blessed.

To the poor he preached resignation and patience. The rich might appear to be happy because they had plenty of material possessions, but often their happiness is illusory. The poor have at least the consolation of comradeship. They experience the warmth of true friendship. It is more often in the poorer homes that one will find good humor and co-operation. They may not have much of the goods of this world, but they are content with their lot and are united together by the firm bonds of their sharing of a common lot.

What makes the poor unhappy is envy of those whom they consider more fortunate than themselves. This sets up a bitterness in their hearts which allows them little peace. They want enjoyment and ease at any cost. They feel that there, and there alone, lies happiness. John tried

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to show the poor who were animated with such sentiments, that they were labouring under an illusion. Material things can never satisfy the human heart, which was made for God, so that He alone can satisfy it. It is true that here below man cannot know perfect happiness: that is reserved for Heaven; but the greatest joy that can be tasted is in the service of God. Of this, the rich have no monopoly. The poor are on an equal footing with them. In fact, they enjoy many advantages.

The bull of canonisation, promulgated by Pope Innocent XII in 1691, praises in these terms the charity of John of God who was being declared a saint.

“The Blessed John of God embraced a way of life in which he could devote himself at the same time to the care of the body and the salvation of the souls of his brothers. Having rented a house in the town of Granada he brought there all the sick that he found. He carried on his own shoulders all those who, weakened by hunger and want, or paralysed by cold, were reduced to lying in the streets or the public places. He begged for them from house to house and from street to street with unbelievable labor.

“He was most devoted to the sick. With incomparable charity he gave to each one whatever he needed. He made their beds, dressed their wounds with his own hands, served their food, emptied their basins and warmed those who were cold. He embraced them so tenderly that it seemed he wanted to

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take them into his heart. Although the number of his patients increased every day, he did not become discouraged nor abandon the work he had begun.

“Placing all his confidence in God, he did not hesitate to acquire a larger hospital. In this new house he continued, in company with those who helped him, to perform his customary exercises of piety. His charity increasing every day, he gathered together a great number of poor and needy and all who were unable to obtain treatment elsewhere for their illnesses. As his charity was not limited to the care of the body, but was principally occupied with the salvation of souls, he was zealous in getting them to frequent the sacraments. He prepared them himself by fervent exhortations and pious counsels which served admirably to sustain and strengthen them in virtue. It is true to say of him that he burned with an ardent desire to restore health of soul and body.”

John of God's stupendous labors were all inspired by his interior life. It was his way of showing God how much he loved Him. This love was sustained by prayer. During the day he was so occupied with his many duties, that he had little time for prayer and meditation: he made up for this unavoidable omission at night. As he only took an hour's sleep each night, he spent the rest of the time in prayer.

The saint had no difficulty in remaining recollected during the day, because he was accustomed to see in each of the sick and, in fact, in each person with whom he

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came in contact, Our Blessed Lord Himself. In this way he remained always in the presence of God. His form of ejaculatory prayer was to kiss the crucifix, which he did very frequently, offering it also to his patients so that they might follow his example. His own interior life was probably summed up in the few words he wrote to a man who wished to join him in his hospital: "Remember often Our Lord Jesus Christ and His Holy Passion. Have God continually before your eyes and never miss hearing Mass every day."

St. John of God not only loved poverty, but he loved the poor. He came in contact with the rich when he visited their homes in search of alms, and we see from his letters that a duchess did not disdain to ask him for spiritual guidance. But he was only really at home with the poor. He knew how they lived, and had gained this knowledge, not out of books, but from life itself. His experiences as a poor shepherd boy, a badly-paid laborer on the fortifications of Ceuta, a pedlar of books, a bare-footed pilgrim begging his bread from door to door, had equipped him for this special mission.

He could not bear to see anyone more destitute than himself. If he received anything in the way of alms, he gave it to the first beggar he met. He even used to exchange the very clothes he wore for the rags of beggars. Most of the time he had no bed; in his own hospital, it was usually occupied by a sick man, and John would pass the night under the stairs. On one occasion when he himself was sick, no bed could be found for him, and he had to make shift as best he could.

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One of the most noticeable features of the sanctity of St. John of God is the extraordinary penances he performed in expiation of his sins. Whether he had sinned gravely or not during his time as a soldier, it is not for us to judge. It is most likely that his own account of his sins may be somewhat exaggerated, that is to say, exaggerated according to our standards. The saints know what sin is, realising acutely what an enormous offence it is to disobey God. In their eyes no expiation can ever be too great. Certainly St. John of God deserves to be classed among the great penitent saints of the Church. What greater form of penance can be imagined than to be regarded as a lunatic and flogged every day? The bull of canonisation dwells at some length on his penances.

“Although he was generous and kind towards the poor, he was severe towards himself. He only took one meal a day and that a very frugal one. He would leave some of his food in order to be able to distribute it to the poor. His habit was so short that it reached only to his knees. It was made of rough cloth and served rather as a penance than as a protection to his body. He always went bare-headed and bare-footed, night and day, coming and going wherever charity called him. His bed was very short and as hard as the ground. His sleep was short, and interrupted by frequent prayers, and by the sighs that his heart, broken by sorrow, directed towards God. In order to master his body and to render it ever more submissive, he wore a rough hairshirt. To this

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he added disciplines and other severe forms of penance."

There can hardly have ever been a more humble saint than John of God. Most of us believe in hiding our weaknesses. When our sins have been forgiven, we hasten to forget them. It was not so with John. After hearing the sermon of Blessed John of Avila, he made public confession of his sins in a crowded square. His manner of expiating his sins was so severe that he was thought to be out of his mind. He had to endure the shame of being branded as insane. When he first started his hospital, many considered it just another phase of his alleged madness.

If the obvious sincerity and charity of the man won many to his side, there were others who never ceased to criticise. They said that he was only encouraging vice by helping all the vagabonds of the town; he was wasting the money of his benefactors by distributing it with scandalous prodigality. Some of his opponents even went so far as to accuse him of playing the hypocrite and of putting into his own pocket the money he received for the poor.

It would be a mistake to think that John was indifferent to these criticisms. There must have been times when his blood boiled, but with the help of grace he had acquired an extraordinary patience. One day a group of beggars stopped him in the street and asked for some help. He divided between them the money he had on him, giving them equal parts. One fellow was dissatisfied

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because he did not get more than the rest, and flew into a rage, calling John a hypocrite, a false religious, a rogue, a stealer of alms. He even went so far as to strike him. The other beggars were indignant and wanted to give him a beating, but John insisted on his being let alone. "I should rather thank and pray for him" was all he said.

We would wish to know what St. John of God was like in appearance, but there is no portrait of him. He was not important enough for that, and anyway he was not the man to care for that kind of publicity. There is very little in his early biographies from which we can build up a description of him. They are much more concerned with what he did than with the man himself; concentrating mostly on the miraculous, which was then the fashion when telling of the saints. Nowadays we are interested in the psychological side of the saint; what were the principal trends of his character, was he an introvert or an extrovert, how did he think and feel?

There does not exist much material for making a character study of John of God. He was over average height and of robust physique. Only an exceptionally strong man could have worked as hard as he did for ten years on one hour's sleep each night, and little food. All his biographers note that towards the end of his days, he was emaciated. This is not surprising, considering the kind of régime he followed. He appears to have worn a beard, but it was not a smart, nicely trimmed one. His clothes must always have been a problem to his friends. Some pious ladies of Granada were continually supplying him with warm

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shirts and underwear. It was no use. He never wore them. They always finished up on the back of some beggar.

John of God was clean, both in his own person and in his hospital, but that is about all that can be said for his personal appearance. For the rest he was often in rags. His ambition was to be the worst-dressed man in Granada. If he met a beggar who was shabbier than himself, he would try to effect an exchange of garments. There was nothing affected about this, nor was it a bid for publicity. He had devoted his life to the welfare of the poor, and he was determined to live as one of them. In those days there was a tremendous gap between the ruling classes and the common people. There was not that toning down which the growth of the middle classes has brought about. Nowadays you cannot judge a person's rank by his clothes. A little shop-girl may be as smartly dressed as a duchess. It was very different in the sixteenth century. The nobles were appalled in silks and brocades, the poor had none of these luxuries.

Pictures of the saint often depict him as a gaunt-looking man, wearing a crown of thorns and resting his hand on a skull. This is not reality; it is the imagination of the person who drew the picture. In any case, it is intended mainly as a piece of symbolism to represent his virtues. Austere, St. John of God certainly was, but we have no grounds for believing that he was sad or morose. There is every reason for supposing the contrary. We may go about with a long face if we give up candies or cigarettes for Lent, but the saints are never weighed

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down by their mortifications. They are freed by them from the dominion of the flesh and are lighter and happier in consequence. That same freedom from pre-occupation with the material, is the reason why St. Francis of Assisi sang and warbled like his little sisters, the birds.

If the sick and the sorrowful flocked around John, it was because they found him a lovable character. The flaw, if it were one, was that he was over-generous. By nature he was impulsive. Misery of any kind aroused in him an overwhelming pity. There was no sacrifice he would not make to alleviate it. His heart was so big that it was capable of embracing all the suffering and misery in the world. He did more than the work of any single man in caring for the sick in his hospital, but this did not satisfy him. There was still destitution and despair hidden away in back-rooms and garrets, and he could know no peace until he had found the unhappy ones. How could he rest as long as there was still one person needing succor?

St. John of God's work was a forerunner of our modern social services. He himself was a social worker who had the immense additional advantage of being a saint. The secret of his success lay in his sanctity rather than in his efficiency, yet his efficiency can be rated as high as that of any of those who carry a string of letters after their names. He laid the basis of a charitable work which has already lasted 400 years and has spread throughout the world. In each of those who sought his aid, he saw a brother or a sister in Christ. It was Jesus Himself Who

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was suffering and in need. At once, the whole warmth of his loving heart responded to that call. There could never have been anything bureaucratic about his methods. The expression "cold as charity" had not been coined when he lived. His charity was warm and affectionate, because it was modeled on the infinite love and pity of Jesus Christ for all mankind.

CHAPTER XVII

HIS LAST DAYS

John of God was breaking down under his superhuman task. For over ten years he had devoted himself, body and soul, to caring for those in need of his charity. He had not spared himself in any way, for every fibre of his being had been devoted to their service. He could truly make his own the words of Holy Job: "I was the eye of the blind and the foot of the lame; I was the father of the poor and the consoler of the afflicted. Did I not shed tears with those who sorrowed? Was not my soul moved at the misery of the poor? I could not bear to see anyone suffer from cold. . . . The stranger never spent the night unsheltered; I opened my door to all travellers."

Surrounded by the ailing, he had always been too busy to be ill himself. He lived in the midst of disease, much of it contagious, but it had never touched him. Now, he

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had to rest occasionally, much against his will. His heart was beginning to flag, and the constant exposure to bad weather had brought on rheumatism. One day he was ill in bed when news was brought that the river Xenil, which passed through Granada, was in flood. Immediately, the thought of the coming winter and the need for fires in the wards and of all the driftwood that the flood would be carrying down. That was enough. His own health was of no importance compared to life-saving warmth for the sick. Donning his tunic and, accompanied by a Brother and a young fellow who worked in the hospital, he made for the river. The yellow water bubbled, tossed and foamed, bearing along shrubs and young trees which it had uprooted in the mountain forests. With long poles, John and his companions stretched out to grab the logs being swept past, and dragged them into the bank. Each was intent on his task, when suddenly there was a scream. The young lad had overreached himself, fallen into the water, and the strong current seizing his body, bore it away. Without a moment's hesitation, John leaped in after him. The torrent tugged at him, but he swam against it. It was no use. The lad had disappeared forever. Sick and weary at heart at such a tragic ending to the expedition, John was dragged to the bank by his companion.

Back at the hospital, he had to take to his bed again. Now his body was racked with a high fever from his immersion in the icy water. His teeth chattered, and his whole frame shook. While he was lying in that state, word was brought that the Archbishop wished to see him

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at once at his house. He could have excused himself under the plea of illness, but the Archbishop was his superior. It was the call of God. He would obey at all costs.

God was not sparing His servant during his last days on earth. Complaints had reached the Archbishop that John's hospital was not properly conducted. They had come from such high sources that he was bound to investigate them. It was said that John was not sufficiently prudent in the choice of those he helped; doubtful characters were admitted to the hospital, women of loose morals were receiving alms; in fact, the gifts of pious benefactors were being put to a dubious use.

John listened with bowed head while the Archbishop spoke to him of the necessity for caution and discretion. How well he knew the cant of those pious humbugs who, being too mean to help the poor themselves, by their carping criticisms prevented anybody else from doing so. His reply was typical of the man: respectful, but straightforward, for he believed in the honesty of his actions:

"Excellency, whenever it will please you to visit the hospital, you will not find the abuses and disorder complained of. Outside of me, there is nobody else who should be sent away. God has confided to me, under your authority, the direction of the hospital in order to receive the sick and the poor and to labor for the conversion of their souls. If I only took in those who were leading a good life, the wards would remain empty, and there would be no opportunity of working for the conversion of sinners. However, I realise that I have not the gifts that I should have and that I am often unfaithful to my voca-

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tion and, to my shame, I confess that John of God is the only sinner in the hospital who eats the bread of the poor in idleness."

The Archbishop was a just man who was only fulfilling a distasteful duty. The humility of John's reply touched him to the core and, putting aside his dignity as a prince of the Church, he leaned over and embraced him. Tears stood in his eyes. "John, go back to your hospital, and run it as you think best. I am satisfied that you have no other end in view than the glory of God and the good of the sick and the poor."

So at the end of his days, this much-criticised man gained the victory over his critics. He went back to his hospital and got into bed. The fever was higher and he was so weak he could hardly walk, for he had probably contracted pneumonia through the wetting. He felt that the hand of death was near, but it had no terrors for him. Was he not going to be united to his God for Whom he had longed so passionately, and Whom he had labored so hard to serve in the person of His suffering creatures.

He sent for Brother Anthony Martin, told him to prepare a list of all the debts that they owed, for he wished them to be paid to the last coin before he died. He then asked for the book of regulations in which had been written a rough rule for the guidance of the Brothers. Calling all his followers together, like a patriarch on his death bed, John gave them his last counsels. Anthony Martin was to be their superior when John was dead. His dying wish was that they should be faithful to the rules that he had given them, because therein they would

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find daily guidance for their life as Hospitaller Brothers. Let them ever be worthy of their glorious title of servants of the sick. Above all—and this was the epitome of his whole life—the thought which must be ever uppermost in their minds was that it was Jesus Christ Whom they were caring for in the person of the sick and the poor.

His followers were grief-stricken. Could it really be that they were going to lose him? How would they ever get on without their father and guide? He was everything in the world to them, and all the love of their generous natures was centred in him after God. They had been attracted by his amiability, his charity, his utter forgetfulness of self. To follow him in the service of God, they had braved everything; broken the closest ties of family and kindred, disregarded the sneers of the world that they were going to associate with a madman, embraced a mode of life in which they spent their days in the fetid atmosphere of a hospital ward surrounded by disease and the groans of the suffering.

One by one they approached the bedside for his blessing; then, with their hearts too full of sorrow for words, they went back to their patients. The sick, seeing the downcast looks of the Brothers, inquired the reason. Then it was their turn to mourn their lot. One wanted to talk to him about his illness, another was worried about his wife and children, a third wanted some clothing: so it went on all day. John needed rest, but he was not getting it, for he had not the heart to tell the sick to stay away. Was he not their servant? They had a right to come to him with their troubles, whenever they wished.

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Benefactors and friends also came to visit him. Among these was a certain Donna Anna Osorio who held him in high esteem. She was appalled when she saw how he was placed. John was lying on a board, with a couple of old blankets for covering and a block under his head to serve for a pillow. There was a constant coming and going of people. It was obvious that the sick man had neither peace nor rest. Donna Anna was convinced that John of God was a saint. If he could be got out of his hospital and given rest and treatment, there was a chance of saving his life. She knew, however, that no amount of pleading would ever drag him away from his beloved patients. She must work on, the only possible way, to make him agree to the move—namely, obedience to one in authority over him. As soon as she returned home, she asked her brother to call on the Archbishop and tell him about John's illness. He was to make it clear to His Excellency that John must inevitably die unless he were removed from his hospital, and that Donna Anna's house was at his disposal. The good lady, who knew her saint, urged that the Archbishop send an obedience to this effect in writing.

Armed with the desired document, Donna Anna returned to the hospital. She spoke to John about the necessity of his receiving treatment in some quiet place, but he was horrified at the very suggestion that he should leave the hospital. How could he leave the poor whom God had confided to his care? If God wished him to die, what better spot could he choose than among his dear sick people and his own religious brethren? Donna Anna

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saw that she was getting nowhere, so she handed him the Archbishop's letter. John took one look at it, and then bowed his head. God was reserving the greatest sacrifice for the end. Not all the hardships and the insults which he had endured during many years were comparable in bitterness to this. His one desire had been to end his days in the midst of those for whom he had spent his life—now God was asking him to relinquish what was dearest to his heart. Well, he had done God's Will all his life. That had been the one thing he had always striven for. He would do it until the end. The struggle was over, and with a nod he signified to Donna Anna his readiness to do whatever obedience imposed on him.

A carriage was waiting outside the door and she gave orders that John be carried out to it. She knew how difficult it would be to get him away and wanted to waste no time over it. But she had not reckoned with the patients. When they saw him passing by on the stretcher, they set up a cry: "Our father is being taken away from us." Instantly, there was a wild scramble, bed-clothes were tossed aside and those who could walk rushed to gather round him. "Father, surely you are not leaving us? We won't allow it. Nobody can take you from us."

John looked at them through the tears that were pouring down his cheeks. All the old tenderness welled up in his heart for these poor abandoned creatures for whom he would have given his life. "Children, desist, I am only leaving you because obedience commands. It is the greatest sacrifice that has ever been asked of me. May God

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bless and protect you all and the work that has been started here for His glory." With those last few comforting words, he was gone, never to see his hospital again.

There was consternation in the city of Granada at the news that John of God was dying. Now that he was going from them, even his most stubborn critics admitted the immense value of the charitable work he had set on foot. Crowds flocked around the door of the Osorio mansion, in the hope of being admitted to see him. They had become so accustomed to making John of God the recipient of all their troubles, that they could not understand why it was not possible to continue pouring them into his sympathetic ear. But Donna Anna knew her Granadians and she placed men-servants at the door to keep everybody out.

There was one group, however, that managed to penetrate as far as John's room. It was a delegation of the municipal authorities of the city, who had come to present its sympathy and its thanks for all that John had done for their poor citizens. John accepted their good wishes with his usual simplicity. Saints are never cynical, otherwise he might well have wondered why they should wait until he was on his dying bed to recognise the value of his work. The archbishop also came to visit him and, with his own hands, anointed him and gave him Holy Viaticum.

It was then the turn of his fellow-workers to visit him. One by one they filed into the room, unashamed of the tears that filled their eyes. John looked at these men, so diverse in character and social rank, but united by a

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common bond, the love of Jesus Christ and of His poor and sick. What a wealth of affection he felt for these men. They had left everything to join him in his work, and shoulder to shoulder they labored together in the wards of the hospital, doing the most unpleasant tasks with a willingness and generosity truly heroic. Once again he begged them to be ever faithful to their noble vocation and to love the unfortunate and needy with all their hearts.

When they had gone, Donna Anna, at his request, read to him the Passion of Our Blessed Lord from the Gospel of St. John. Then she, too, left him, for he needed rest. It was several hours later when the Brother who was attending on him entered the room. We can imagine his startled amazement on seeing the invalid fully clothed and kneeling on the steps of the little altar that had been erected in his room. Quietly the Brother tiptoed over to him. Such a very sick man should be in bed. He touched John very gently on the shoulder, but there was no response. John was dead. It was March 8th, 1550, his fifty-fifth birthday. The manner of his dying was extraordinary. In the normal way the body should have slumped to the ground due to the relaxation of the muscles, but Almighty God permitted it to retain the attitude of prayer even when the soul had flown to its eternal rest.

In the case of the majority of the saints, all the honors are paid to them after their death. During their life they are ignored, often despised. Such was the case with St. John of God. There were those who had always looked upon him as a madman. Others held that it was an act

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of imprudence, a flying in the face of Providence, for a man with no means to take upon himself the care of so many sick and poor people. There was another group who just criticised him without giving any reasons. Probably they felt that there was something almost indecent in making so much fuss about those who were in dire need. John's whole-hearted devotion to the suffering gave the rich twinges of conscience which interfered with their pleasures. The moment he was dead, however, all was changed. He became overnight the hero of Granada and almost of all Spain. His funeral was a most grandiose affair. His early biographers say that it equalled in pomp that of an emperor. The whole city of Granada turned out, from the Governor and the Archbishop down to the humblest citizen. The magnitude of the crowd can be judged by the fact that it took three hours for the cortège to make its way from Donna Osorio's house to the church. The coffin was borne on the shoulders of four of the highest noblemen of Spain.

For the last time, John passed through the streets of Granada, those streets that he had tramped day and night, for so many years, in search of the means to maintain his poor. Those same streets had seen him bearing home on his shoulders the old and the helpless; now they saw him carried high in triumph on the shoulders of nobles. What would have pleased John most, however, was to know that he was passing in the midst of his beloved poor. It was they who lined the side-walks. It was their tears that were the most genuine thing amid all the magnificence of that day. They sorrowed for their

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friend. There were others who gave them alms and a look of pity and then passed on, but John had given them constant loving service. He had donated himself entirely to their interests. He had lived as one of them, living in even poorer fashion than they themselves. During ten years he had been merciless to himself, drawing on all the resources of a superb physique until there was nothing left, so that we might ascribe the cause of death to exhaustion in the service of the friendless. The poor knew this. They had witnessed his untiring efforts to relieve the hardships and the drabness of their lives and to restore to them the self-respect which so often disappeared in the mud of the streets. The tears they shed were inspired by grateful memory. They would not forget. It was the tribute that John of God would have desired: that of humble folk.

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